

# EVALUATION REPORT

## COLORADO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STUDY



Colorado Office of the  
Child's Representative



National Council of Juvenile and Family Court  
Judges

Juvenile Law Programs

March 2016

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges® (NCJFCJ) headquartered on the University of Nevada campus in Reno since 1969, provides cutting-edge training, wide-ranging technical assistance, and research to help the nation's courts, judges, and staff in their important work. Since its founding in 1937 by a group of judges dedicated to improving the effectiveness of the nation's juvenile courts, the NCJFCJ has pursued a mission to improve courts and systems practice and raise awareness of the core issues that touch the lives of many of our nation's children and families.

For more information about the NCJFCJ or this report, please contact:

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges  
Juvenile Law Programs  
University of Nevada  
P.O. Box 8970  
Reno, Nevada 89507  
(775) 327-5300  
[www.ncjfcj.org](http://www.ncjfcj.org)  
[research@ncjfcj.org](mailto:research@ncjfcj.org)

©2016, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

Mari Kay Bickett, JD, Chief Executive Officer, NCJFCJ

Brief Authored by:

Irene Rose, MPH, Research Associate, NCJFCJ  
Alicia Summers, Ph.D., Program Director, Research and Evaluation, NCJFCJ

This report is a publication of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Juvenile Law Program. The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges wishes to acknowledge that this material is made possible by Cooperative Agreement No. 2012-MU-MU-K001 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice or the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

*“Colorado needs to approach youth engagement with their own children in mind, because simply, these are our children.”*

*-Colorado Judicial Officer*

## Introduction

Youth engagement is a critical component of the dependency court process, but is often a challenge. The need to improve youth engagement has been a national topic of interest, especially in dependency and neglect courts. This is largely due to the fact that youth involved in these cases are an especially vulnerable population that often experience a loss of control and predictability over their lives when they become involved in the child welfare systems. Decisions by stakeholders are often made without youth's input. These important life decisions include where a child will live temporarily and permanently, where the child will go to school, how often (and if) a child will see their parents or other family members, along with a multitude of other decisions about a child's well-being.

Nationally, there have been many federal and state advances that have aimed to improve youth engagement. Federal efforts include the Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2009. These acts mandate that youth are required to be consulted with about their proposed permanency or transition plan, as well as, require transition plans to be youth-directed as part of the case review process. Additionally, many states have developed legislation supporting children in the courtroom due to these changes in federal law and the response to recommendations of national organizations and former foster youth.

Many prominent national child welfare and legal organizations have long recognized the critical importance of involvement of children in their dependency court hearings. Examples of these organizations include:

### National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ)

- In 2012, the NCJFCJ collaborated with members of the Bar Youth Empowerment Project and the American Bar Association to author a technical assistance bulletin report, *Seen, Heard, and Engaged: Children in Dependency Court Hearings*, designed to provide information, guidance, and aspirational practice recommendations to dependency courts and dependency court judges with regard to bringing children to court for their hearings related to their own dependency cases.

### American Bar Association (ABA)

- In 2011, the ABA passed *The Model Act Governing the Representation of Children in Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Proceedings*. Section 9 outlines a child's right to notice and the right to attend and participate in all hearings related to the child's case.
- In 1996, the ABA passed the Standards of Practice for Lawyers who Represent Children in Abuse and Neglect Cases. The Standards suggest that children should be present during significant court hearings. They provide criteria for lawyers to evaluate when considering whether a child should be present, including whether the child wants to attend, the child's age, and the potential trauma to the child. Lawyers and other children's representatives are urged to consult with therapists, caretakers, or other persons who have specific knowledge of the child regarding whether attending the hearing would be damaging to the child.

### National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC)

- In 1999, NACC passed similar standards for representing children in abuse and neglect cases. NACC's standards indicate that children, in most circumstances, should be in attendance during significant court hearings.

### Pew Commission

- The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care 2004 report, *Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanency and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care*, recommends that courts should be organized to enable children and parents to participate in a meaningful way in their own court proceedings. The report states that children benefit when they have the opportunity to actively participate in court proceedings, as does the quality of decisions when judges can see and hear from key parties.

### University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Conference Recommendations

- The 2006 Recommendations of the UNLV Conference on Representing Children in Families: Child Advocacy and Justice Ten Years After Fordham state that children should be included in their proceedings unless they choose not to or the court finds it harmful to the child to be present. Judges should also encourage children to participate in the courtroom.

While legislative efforts have advanced, social science research surrounding youth engagement has been limited. The few studies that have been conducted on this topic support the hypothesis that children should be more effectively involved in permanency planning and in their court hearings. For example, one study found that an overwhelming majority of youth reported that they attend court only some of the time (73%), followed by never (29%), most of the time (20%) and always (18%). The majority of youth also indicated that when they did attend court, it was helpful and made them feel that they were more informed about their life. Additionally, youth expressed that the experience they received through their involvement in their case was worthwhile.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose, therefore, of this study is to examine youth engagement among various stakeholders, including youth, through a wide lens. This includes not only the physical presence of youth in court but also the active engagement with youth, the provision of support for youth throughout court proceedings, and the preparation of youth prior to coming to court.

---

<sup>1</sup> Khoury, A. "Seen and Heard: Involving Children in Dependency Court", *Child Law Practice Dec*, 2006 (citing "Home At Last: My voice, My Life, My Future Foster Youth Participation in Court: A National Survey (2006)).

## Study Overview & Methodology

Most recently, the NCJFCJ collaborated with the Colorado Office of Child's Representation and the Colorado Improvement Program with the Office of State Court Administrators to assist in a study regarding youth engagement. Jurisdictions that identified youth engagement as a focus in their Best Practice Court Teams (BPCTs) were invited to participate in the project. The overall goal of the study was to evaluate the perceptions and attitudes of stakeholders and youth regarding youth engagement in dependency cases to inform future projects, initiatives, and work.

The study had two components: 1.) to evaluate the perceptions, current practices, and recommendations of stakeholders, specifically guardians-*ad litem* (GALs) and judicial officers and 2.) to evaluate the perceptions and current practices youth experience in their own cases. Lead judicial officers in identified jurisdictions were initially invited to participate through an email sent by the NCJFCJ researchers. Judicial officers were asked to provide information on what they believed would be the most useful things to know about youth engagement in their jurisdiction (i.e. youth's perceptions to their GAL, judicial officer's opinions on youth in court, strategies or practices of how judicial officers are promoting youth attendance, etc.) This information was later used to help inform the development of survey tools. Judicial officers who responded to the email invitation and indicated their interest to continue to be involved in the project were included in the next phase of the study.

User surveys were then developed from the information gained from judicial officer's responses, as well as, previous youth engagement projects conducted by the NCJFCJ and other national organizations. Developed tools were also vetted by various professionals prior to dissemination to ensure surveys were appropriate.

### Stakeholder Surveys

Stakeholder surveys were sent out electronically through a list-serve of all judicial officers and GALs in participating jurisdictions. A Survey Monkey link was imbedded in the email. Individuals were given three weeks to complete the survey. A reminder email was sent one week after the initial email invitation to incite responses. The stakeholder survey was sent out to 100 GALs and 36 judicial officers. Of those, 19 GALs and 11 judicial officers responded representing an overall stakeholder response rate of 22.1% (19% for GALs and 30.6% for judicial officers, respectively).

### Youth Surveys

Youth surveys were developed with careful attention to ensure questions were straightforward and did not use technical or confusing language. The NCJFCJ researchers sent youth surveys and dissemination plans to lead judicial officers in participating jurisdictions via email. Dissemination plans included suggestions on how jurisdictions might implement youth surveys and collect data. Each jurisdiction was to develop their own protocol for disseminating youth surveys to reflect their available resources and to provide data back to the NCJFCJ researchers for analyses. The NCJFCJ researchers were available for assistance if jurisdictions experienced any challenges or had questions throughout the dissemination process. Youth eligibility criteria was suggested to include any youth who had an open dependency and neglect case during the study time frames (February

1<sup>st</sup> – March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016). Only one out of seven judicial jurisdictions disseminated youth surveys. Two youth surveys were collected in this jurisdiction and their responses were analyzed to provide a basis of youth perspective.

For the purposes of this report, frequency analyses were conducted on both stakeholder and youth surveys to provide a general overview of responses across participating jurisdictions. Data from stakeholder surveys was stratified by role (judicial officer and GAL) to highlight potential trends or differences among professional roles. In addition, responses provided by each participating judicial district were stratified and compared with aggregate youth attendance data from Colorado's Youth in Court Report FY2016.

# Stakeholder Survey Results

## Methods

### Attitudes

To assess general attitudes and perceptions regarding youth engagement, stakeholder surveys asked respondents a range of questions. Participants were first asked whether they believed youth should attend their court hearings. All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Always, 2=Sometimes, and 3=Never. Respondents were then provided an opportunity to explain their opinion through a 'free-response' question option. Quantitative analyses were conducted to determine common themes. A frequency analysis was conducted to determine which themes were most prominent. Stakeholders were also asked to determine how often youth attended their court hearings and the main barriers to youths' attendance.

Stakeholders were then asked if youth's presences is helpful in decision-making using a 3-point scale, where 1=Yes, 2=Sometimes and 3=No. Finally, participants were then asked how to describe the reasons why youth attendance was helpful in decision-making from a list of multiple choice options presented.

### Assessment of Self & Stakeholders

Stakeholder surveys assessed *current practices* of youth engagement in four different ways. These included: 1.) attendance/presence of youth, 2.) support of youth in court proceedings, 3.) engagement with youth during court and 4.) preparation of youth for court.

To assess practices related to youth attendance and presence, respondents were asked to rate themselves on how often they request youth to come to their hearings. Responses were made using a 4-point scale in which 1=Always and 4=Never. Respondents were then asked to rate how often *other* stakeholders request youth to attend court on the same 4-point scale.

To assess support provided for youth in court proceedings, respondents were asked to rate themselves on how often they support youth in court proceedings (i.e. making youth feel comfortable and heard, etc.). Responses were made using a 4-point scale in which 1=Always and 4=Never. Respondents were then asked to rate how often *other* stakeholders support youth in court proceedings on the same 4-point scale.

To assess the engagement with youth during court, respondents were asked to rate themselves on how often they engage with youth (i.e. ask youth questions, find information directly from youth, etc.). Responses were made using a 4-point scale in which 1=Always and 4=Never. Respondents were then asked to rate how often *other* stakeholders engage youth in court on the same 4-point scale.

To assess how youth are prepared for court, respondents were asked to rate themselves on how often they prepare youth (i.e. inform youth what to expect, what time court hearings are, etc.).



Responses were made using a 4-point scale in which 1=Always and 4=Never. Respondents were then asked to rate how often *other* stakeholders prepare youth for court on the same 4-point scale.

### **Current Practices & Suggested Improvements**

Participants were also asked to describe the specific strategies they currently utilize to encourage, support, engage, and prepare youth for court using a 'free-response' option. Participants were then asked to identify where (or with whom) improvements in future efforts could be made surrounding the four components of youth engagement. Quantitative analyses were conducted to determine themes. A frequency analysis was conducted to determine which themes were most prominent.

### **Other Practices**

In order to determine whether the jurisdictions practiced closed or private meetings with youth, respondents were asked how often they themselves allow and/or request youth to be able to speak in chambers. Responses were made using a 4-point scale in which 1=Always and 4=Never. Collaborative efforts were assessed by asking respondents if they felt adequate collaboration among all stakeholders was established. Responses were made using a 3-point scale, where 1=Yes, 2=Sometimes and 3=No. An additional "Other" category was provided.

Finally, to assess which area stakeholders felt the need for continued focus, participants were asked to select which of the four components of youth engagement they felt needed to be prioritized.

## Summary of Stakeholder Findings

The following are the highlights of the stakeholder responses:

### Demographics

- The majority (60%) of respondents indicated that they were GALs followed by judicial officers (36.7%). One participant did not identify their role.
- The first judicial district had the highest proportion of survey participants (26.7%) followed by the second and fourth judicial districts (20%).
- A large percentage (40%) of respondents indicated that they had over ten years of experience working with child abuse and neglect cases followed by participants who indicated they had 2-3 years working in the field (23.3%).

### Attitudes

- Half (50%) of participants indicated that youth *should* attend their court hearings; another 46.7% indicated that youth should be present *sometimes*. The reasons in the difference of opinion were largely affected by the demographics of youth and hearing specific variables.
- Most participants (66.7%) indicated that, in their experience, youth *sometimes* attend their hearings with only 20% who felt youth *always* or *often* attend court.
- The most identified barriers to youth's presence included: transportation (80%), time out of school (80%), schedule conflicts (53.3%) and other stakeholders' recommendations (53.3%).
- The majority (86.7%) of participants indicated that having youth present in court is *helpful* in the decision-making process *to any extent*. Reasons stakeholders identified included youth seem to feel heard (83.3%), youth gain a better understanding of their plan and the court process (80%), and it is helpful to see, in-person, the individual to which important life decisions are made (76.7%).
- Respondents indicated that they themselves *always* or *often* encourage youth to come to their hearings (73.1%), support youth during court proceedings (96.2%), engage youth in court conversations (95.2%), and prepare youth for court (81%). Participants indicated that other stakeholders *always* or *often* encourage youth to come to their hearings (19.2%), support youth during court proceedings (61.5%), engage youth in court (60%) and prepare youth for court (57.9%).

### Current Practices & Future Practice Suggestions

#### *Encouraging Youth to Come to Court*

- The largest category of strategies stakeholders currently use to **encourage** youth to attend their hearings include: (1) familiarizing youth with the court process and (2) using positive reinforcement when youth attend.
- Respondents provided suggestions to improve youth attendance by changing current court culture.

### *Supporting Youth in Court Proceedings*

- The largest category of strategies stakeholders currently use to **support** youth during court proceedings included: (1) providing thorough explanations to youth and (2) creating positive environments within the courtroom.
- Respondents provided suggestions to improve practices to support youth through the development of practices that make youth feel comfortable and reduce traumatizing events.

### *Engaging with Youth*

- The largest category of strategies stakeholders currently use to **engage** with youth included: (1) questioning youth directly about their opinions and (2) providing options for youth to communicate in other means.
- Respondents provided suggestions including ensuring stakeholders speak directly to youth and discuss topics or things the youth is interested in.

### *Preparing Youth for Court*

- The largest category of strategies stakeholders currently use to **prepare** youth for court included walking youth through the court process (i.e. what to expect).
- Respondents provided suggestions to improve practices to prepare youth by developing child-friendly resources to familiarize youth with how court works, the types of decisions that may be made in court, and the various roles/entities that are involved in their cases.

### *Other Practices*

- The majority of respondents (40%) indicated that they **never** request or allow youth to talk in chambers versus open court.
- Almost a quarter (20%) of participants indicated that there is **not** adequate collaboration in their jurisdiction. Respondents indicated that collaboration can be improved through identifying youth engagement as a common priority, having continual and frequent discussions with other stakeholders, and having trainings to ensure all parties know their roles and responsibilities.
- Youth presence/attendance was identified as an area where continued efforts need to be placed.

## Results

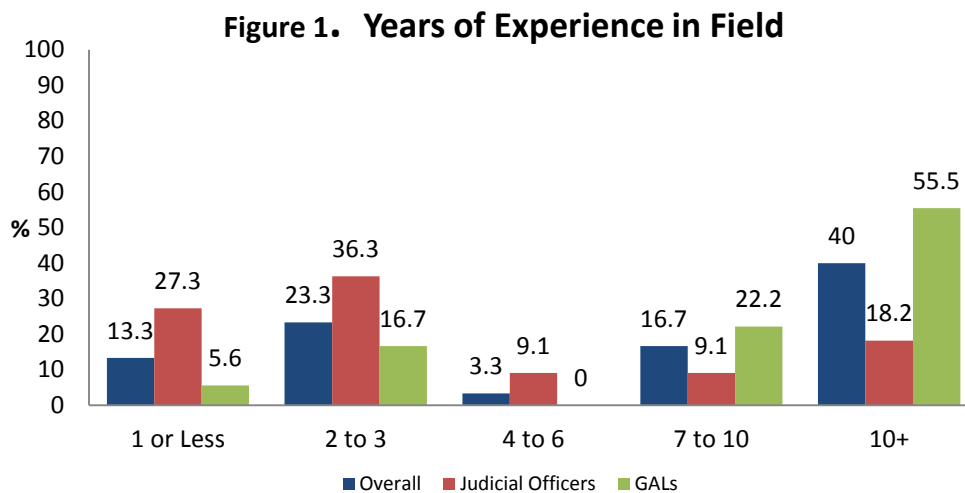
### Demographics

A total of 30 participants took the stakeholder survey. Survey participants identified themselves as guardian ad-litem (GALs) (60%) followed by judicial officers (36.7%). One participant did not identify their role.

Six judicial districts were represented. The most representation came from the first judicial district (26.7%) followed by the second and fourth judicial districts (20%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Regions of Participants	
	%
<b>First Judicial District:</b> Gilpin & Jefferson County	26.7
<b>Second Judicial District:</b> Denver County	20
<b>Fourth Judicial District:</b> El Paso & Teller County	20
<b>Seventh Judicial District:</b> Alabama, Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose, Ouray & San Miguel County	3.3
<b>Eighteenth Judicial District:</b> Arapahoe, Douglas, Elbert, & Lincoln County	10
<b>Twentieth Judicial District:</b> Dolores & Montezuma County	13.3

Overall, the majority of participants (40%) had over ten years of experience in the child abuse and dependency field (Figure 1). Within roles, GALs had the most participants (55.5%) reporting over ten years of experience; while the majority of judicial officers (36.3%) reported between 2-3 years of experiences.

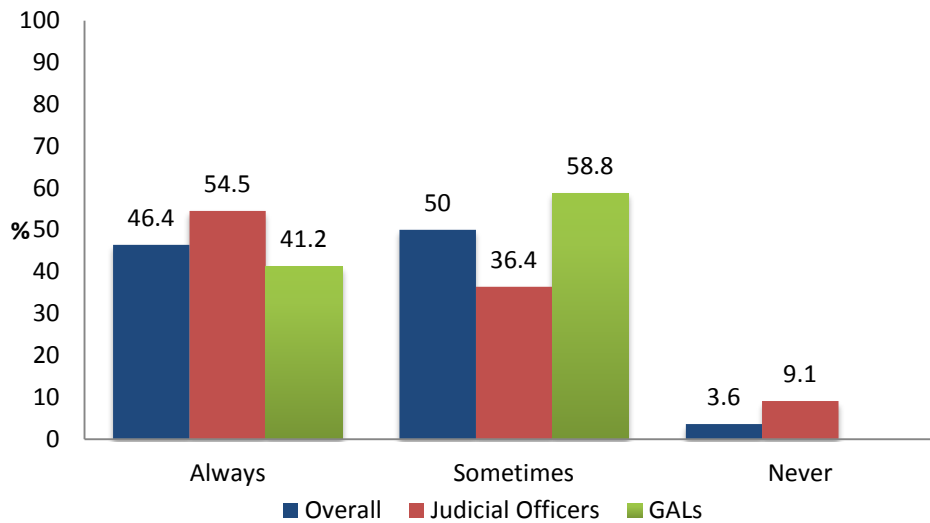


### Attitudes

### Youth Attendance

Overall, half of participants (50%) indicated that youth should *sometimes* attend their court hearings followed by those who indicated they should *always* attend (46.4%). Judicial officers had a higher proportion of respondents that indicated that youth should *always* attend their court hearings compared to GALs (54.5 vs. 41.2%, respectively). However, the only stakeholders group that indicated youth should *never* be in attendance in court were also judicial officers (9.1%) (See Figure 2). This suggests that the stakeholders, for the most part, believe youth's presence in court is appropriate.

**Figure 2. Appropriateness of Youth Attendance**



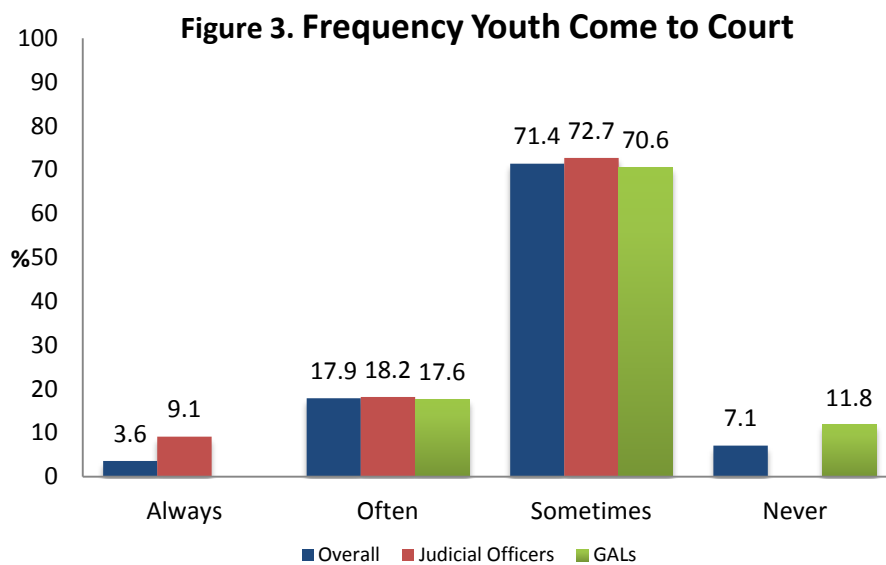
### Explanations on Youth Attendance in Court

Stakeholders were asked to explain their stance on youth's presence in court. The themes that were identified as being the **most** significant included:

- Youth's experience of empowerment & voice (30.8%)
- Youth demographics (i.e. age) and topics of hearing (30.8%)
- Youth's increased ability to understand case or court process (26.9%)
- Autonomy and choice of youth (11.5%)

Of stakeholders who replied that youth should *always* be at court hearings, respondents indicated that it provided youth with a sense of empowerment and voice to youth. Among stakeholders who replied youth should *sometimes* or *never* be present, reported that youth's age, cognitive abilities, and/or traumatizing topics were reasons to exclude youth from hearings.

Overall, the majority of participants (71.4%) indicated that youth *sometimes* come to court while less than a quarter (21.5%) indicated that youth *always* or *often* do so. The stakeholder group who indicated that youth *never* attend their court hearing were GALs (See Figure 3). These findings suggest that while youth presence is currently occurring, continued improvements can be made to ensure that more youth are regularly appearing for their court hearings.



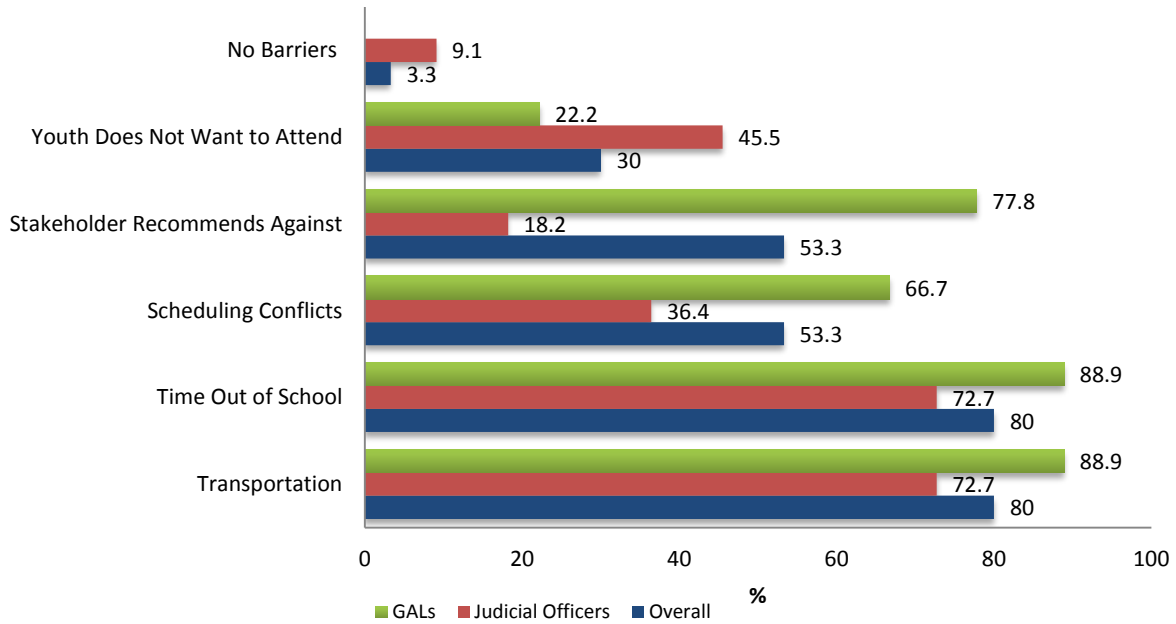
**Barriers**

The majority of stakeholders overall indicated that the two biggest barriers to youth’s presence included transportation (80%) and time out of school (80%) (See Figure 4). There was most variability among two respective barriers:

- Stakeholder recommends against youth’s attendance
- Youth does not want to attend

GALs were more likely to think that stakeholders’ recommendations against youth were barriers compared to judicial officers (77.8% versus 18.2%). Additionally, judicial officers indicated that the youth’s wishes of not wanting to attend was more of a barrier than GALs (45.4% versus 22.2%). Judicial officers may feel that they exercise the ultimate authority when considering other stakeholder recommendations; while GALs may feel they have increased opportunity to address youth’s desire to not attend court.

**Figure 4. Barriers to Youth Attendance**



Identified Strategies to Overcome Barriers

Stakeholders were able to identify common strategies that their respective jurisdictions currently utilize to overcome identified barriers. The most prominent strategies included:

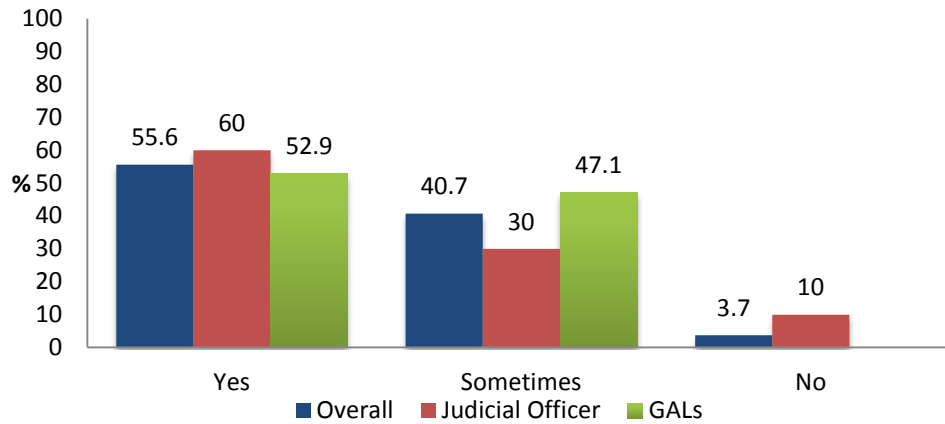
- Collaborative efforts to transport youth (37.5%)
- Scheduling hearings at times most convenient for youths’ schedules (25%)
- Providing additional methods of communication for youth (20.8%)

The most prominent barriers for youth participation revolved around transportation and time out of school. To rectify these issues, stakeholders indicated they engage in collaboration with various entities, including GALs, caseworkers, CASAs, and foster parents, to provide transportation. In addition, some stakeholders identified the practice of making court orders that require agencies to transport youth. Efforts to reduce unnecessary time spent away from school was dealt with by scheduling dockets at times youth are not in school (i.e. later in the day). Video conferencing, phone calls and/or allowing youth to meet with stakeholders privately were also strategies to both reduce transportation issues and increase time in school.

Decision-Making

The overwhelming majority of participants (96.3%) indicated that youth’s presence in court is *helpful to any extent* in the decision-making process. A small percentage of judicial officers (10%) indicated that youth’s presence was **not** helpful in such regards (Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Helpfulness in Decision-Making**



The majority<sup>1</sup> of participants believe that youth's presence is helpful as it provides youth with the opportunity to feel heard (83.3%) and gain a better understanding of their case (80%) (See Figure 6).

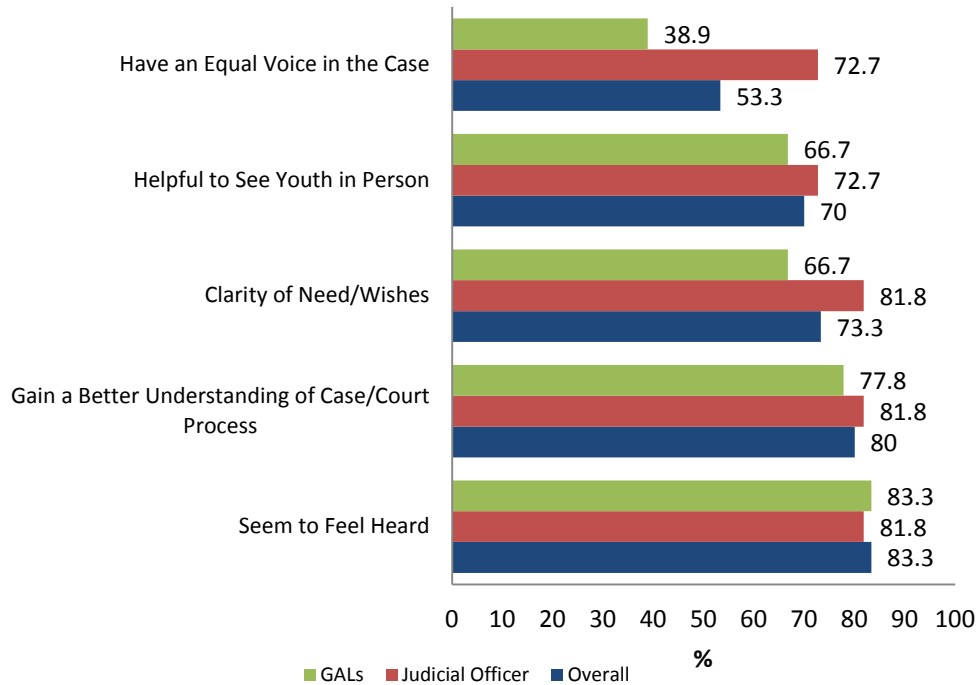
There was most variability regarding the statement:

- Youth's presence is helpful in allowing youth to have an equal voice in the case.

Judicial officers were more likely than GALs to hold an affirmative opinion to the statement above (72.% versus 38.9%, respectively). These findings suggest that overall, stakeholders feel youth's presence is beneficial to ensure appropriate decisions are made.



**Figure 6. Reasons Presence is Helpful in Decision-Making**

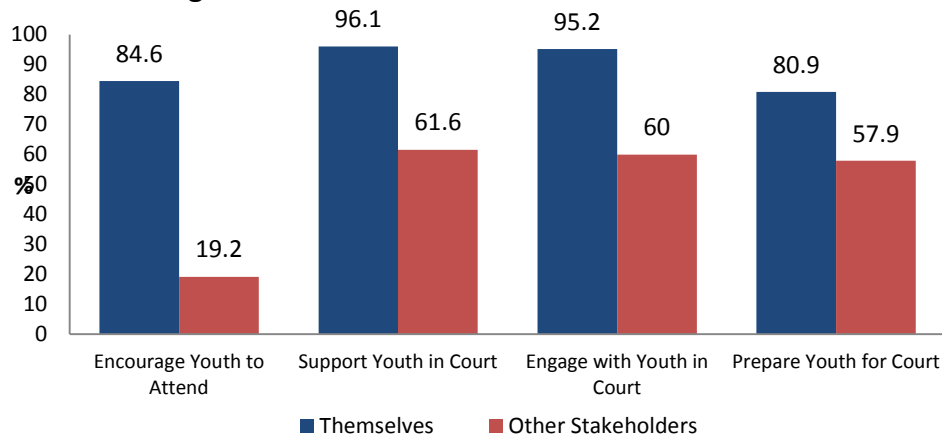


Self-Assessment of Stakeholders

Overall, stakeholders were more likely to indicate that they themselves *always* or *often* utilize practices of youth engagement when compared to how often they felt *other* stakeholders do so. The largest percentage of stakeholders who identified they *always* or *often* engage in practices was regarding *supporting* youth in court proceedings (96.1%) and *engaging* with youth in court (95.2%). *Preparing* youth for court was the category that had the lowest percentage of stakeholders who reported they frequently engaged in such practices (84.6%).

Stakeholders were asked to rate how often they felt other stakeholders engaged in these practices. While percentage differences between how stakeholders rated themselves compared to others among most components was similar, one category had the highest percentage of variability. There was a 65.4% difference between the percentage of stakeholders who reported they themselves *always* or *often* encourage youth to come and the percentage of stakeholders who reported other colleagues *always* or *often* encourage youth to come to court. This issue may be resolved by ensuring all professionals actively play a role in voicing invitations to youth and providing hearing notifications to help increase youth attendance at hearings.

**Figure 7. Self-Assessment of Practices \***



\*Responses of Always or Often included in analysis

Among judicial officers, the largest percentage reported they themselves *always* or *often* support youth in court (96.1%) and engage youth in court (95.2%) (Table 2). Judicial officers identified that preparing youth for court was something they do not do as often. Only sixty percent (60%) of judicial officers reported they themselves *always* or *often* assist with these efforts, but felt that other stakeholders frequently do so. These findings suggest that judicial officers largely believe that they are employing youth engagement practices when youth are in the courtroom. Improvements can be made to increase how often judicial officers invite youth to court and assist in preparing youth by explaining the court processes.

Among GALs, the largest percentage reported they themselves *always* or *often* encourage youth to come to court and support youth in court. Similarly to judicial officer findings, the category that GALs engaged in the least was related to preparing youth for court (86.7%). GALs largely reported they felt other stakeholders infrequently encourage youth to attend their hearings, specifically. These findings suggest that GALs largely believe they are habitually participating in all youth engagement components and believe other stakeholders could improve efforts.

**Table 2. Self-Assessment in Practices Related to Youth Engagement \***

Practice Topic						
	% Judicial Officers (Themselves)	% Judicial Officers (Others)	% Difference Among Judicial Officers	% GALs (Themselves)	% GALs (Others)	% Difference Among GALs
Encourage Youth to Come to Court	66.6	19.2	47.4	93.8	6.3	87.5
Support Youth in Court	96.1	55.5	40.6	93.8	38.8	55
Engage Youth in Court Proceedings	95.2	80	15.2	93.3	57.1	36.2
Prepare Youth for Court	60	100	-40	86.7	46.4	40.3

\*Responses included in analysis if stakeholders respondent Always or Often

## Current Practices & Suggested improvements

### Encourage Youth to Attend Court

#### Strategies Used

The most prominent themes of strategies that jurisdictions were currently utilizing included:

- Addressing fears or clarifying court process with youth (37.5%)
- Using positive reinforcement when youth attend court (25%)
- Verbally inviting and encouraging youth to attend after every hearing (20.8%)

*"I explain the experience so they don't have to fear it....Praise & engage youth when they come to court....I let youth know almost always that it is an open invitation for them to come."*

Stakeholders particularly mentioned that they viewed their roles as being pivotal to dispelling negative ideas or misconceptions youth may have about the court process, emphasizing to youth the importance of their presence, and using reward systems (i.e. token economies) as youth take steps to be active participants in their own cases.

#### Suggested Improvements

Survey participants indicated that improvements to youth attendance can be made largely through:

- Shifting court culture (38.9%)
- Creating consensus on the importance of youth presence among all stakeholders (33.3%)
- Mandating child protective agency or other entities to transport youth (27.8%)

Stakeholders described ideas for improving youth presence by the establishment of court practices that outline youth attendance as being a critical component of case review and/or permanency hearings. Stakeholders identified the need for all roles to be on the same page regarding youth engagement, adopting the belief that youths' presence in court is best practice. Encouraging youth through invitation should be a system-wide effort to help increase the messaging youth hears. In addition, court orders can help require agencies who work closely with youth, and are often in the best position, to transport youth to and from their hearings.

### Support Youth in Court

#### Strategies Used

Stakeholders were able to identify strategies utilized most often. The most prominent themes of strategies included:

- Improving practices in court (47.1%)
- Creating positive environments in court (29.4%)
- Thoroughly explaining things to youth (23.5%)

*"I allow youth to speak last so no one can argue with their statement, diminishing their position. I give every young child who comes to court a stuffed animal to help them remember the situation positively."*

Stakeholders were able to identify the need to develop protocols in dependency and neglect courts to support this especially vulnerable population. Examples included: making sure courtrooms and staff are trauma-informed, continuously checking in with youth to see how they are feeling, limiting courtroom audiences, allowing youth to invite friends or other supportive persons to their hearings, meeting with youth informally, to name a few.

The court room atmosphere can be an especially intimidating space for youth, therefore, the creation of an environment that is inviting and comfortable may allow youth to feel supported and heard. Strategies to do so include: considering youth's preferences first, utilizing a strength-based approach for each youth, and removing any form of intimidation. Lastly, ensuring that youth understand what is happening is important. Stakeholders should try to use non-technical, lay person language as much as possible.

### *Suggested Improvements*

Survey participants recommended improving the support provided to youth by:

- Increasing judicial leadership (35.3%)
- Improving court system practices and processes (35.3%)
- Providing resources to familiarize youth with court system (29.4%)

Judicial leaders have an especially important role that sets the tone for practices that support youth. Judges can empower children by ensuring every child has a voice in the decisions being made about and for them. Improving court practices, such as focusing on the improved treatment of youth in custody and providing youth friendly waiting spaces, can help youth feel more valued when they are in court.

### *Engaging Youth in Court*

#### *Strategies Used*

Stakeholders identified common practices they use surrounding the inclusion of youth in courtroom discussions. The most prominent themes of strategies included:

- Providing additional means to communicate (65%)
- Directly asking youth questions (35%)

*"I remind them of past conversations where they expressed what they want and prompt them to tell the court."*

Specific strategies included: reminding youth of prior conversations, ensuring youth are aware of topics that may be discussed prior to their hearing, and asking for youths' opinions about how they feel about decisions being considered or made. Youth may also feel more comfortable expressing themselves through other means of communication. Judicial officers and GALs suggested allowing youth to write letters, to approach the bench to talk with the judicial officer, or record themselves prior as additional means of communication with the court.

Stakeholders discussed the importance of following up with youth regarding topics to ensure their understanding. Stakeholders recommended informal check-ins after court, asking caregivers or

foster parents details of they heard from youth, and/or implementing youth surveys. Asking youth questions throughout their hearings, as well as, asking youth to summarize in their own words may allow stakeholders to assess if youth’s perspective aligns with what is actually occurring.

### *Suggested Improvements*

Survey participants indicated improvements to engage youth in court proceedings should include:

- Judicial officers directing meaningful and insightful conversations/questions (40%)
- Allowing youth to talk in court about things that are of interest to them (33.3%)
- Asking youth questions directly or through surveys (26.7%)

Judicial officers can help to direct the flow of conversations in court and assist youth in voicing their needs and wishes in court. Stakeholders could also help focus conversations around each youth, ask youth questions to clarify things, follow-up with youth at a later time, and ask youth to summarize important decisions back to the court in their own words. In addition, communication with GALs, CASAs, and other stakeholders can help to provide feedback to the team on specific ideas or topics that are of particular interest to each respective youth. By allowing youth to talk about things they have interest in, it may reduce discomfort and may help build repertoire for future hearings.

### *Preparing Youth for Court*

#### *Strategies Used*

Stakeholders identified common practices currently utilized regarding preparing youth for court. The most prominent themes of strategies included:

- Engaging in pre-work with youth (80%)
- Discussing of the purpose of hearings before each hearing (20%)

*“Discussing things with youth fully in advance. I have brought youth to court to watch other cases before they come to court the first time. I like to get the 12-15 year olds to see the judge first in chambers and to the formal court proceedings later.”*

Specific strategies included showing youth the courtroom in advance, introducing youth to the judicial officer and other professionals prior to hearings, and providing details on the court process. Stakeholders also identified the need to discuss progress and updates of case plans with youth prior to them coming to court so they are not surprised by decisions that may be made.

### *Suggested Improvements*

Survey participants indicated that improvements can be made to prepare youth for court largely by:

- Providing all youth with introductions to the court (66.7%)
- Collaborating among entites to ensure consistent messaging (33.3%)

Stakeholders who work with youth on a more frequent basis (i.e. GALs, CASA, caseworkers, etc.) may be in a better position to prepare youth for court than others. Such individuals should outline the purpose of court, the decisions that are (or need to be made) in hearings, how decisions will impact youth, and the various ways that youth can be involved in their own hearings. A specific suggestion included the development of a walk-thru video or website that shows youth such things as: what it is like to go to a courthouse, go through security, go into a courtroom, who is in

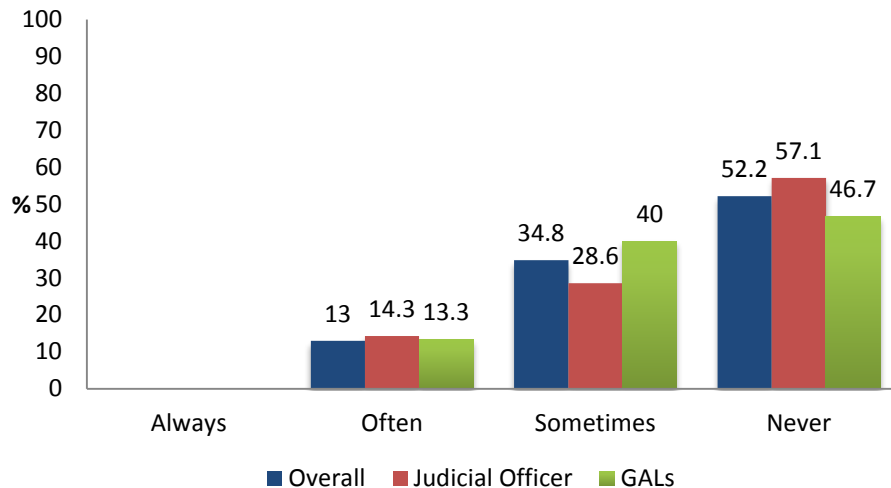
attendance, where they should sit, what questions they should ask, etc. Additionally, stakeholders suggested that improving collaboration and maintaining consistent contact among all agencies could help to ensure professionals are providing youth with similar instructions and/or explanations about what is occurring in their cases.

## Other Practices

### Youth in Chambers

Overall, roughly half of stakeholders (52.2%) indicated that they *never* allow or request youth to speak in chambers (Figure 8). Judicial officers were more likely to indicate that they *never* allow youth to come speak with them in chambers (57.1%) when compared to the percentage of GALs who reported that they *never* request youth to speak in chambers (46.7%).

**Figure 8. Request/Allow Youth in Chambers**



Stakeholders were asked to explain the factors that affect their decision to allow or request youth to speak in chambers. The largest themes identified as factors included:

- Youth's request to speak in private ( 33.3%)
- The need for information to be put on the record (33.3%)
- The recommendations of stakeholders (20%)

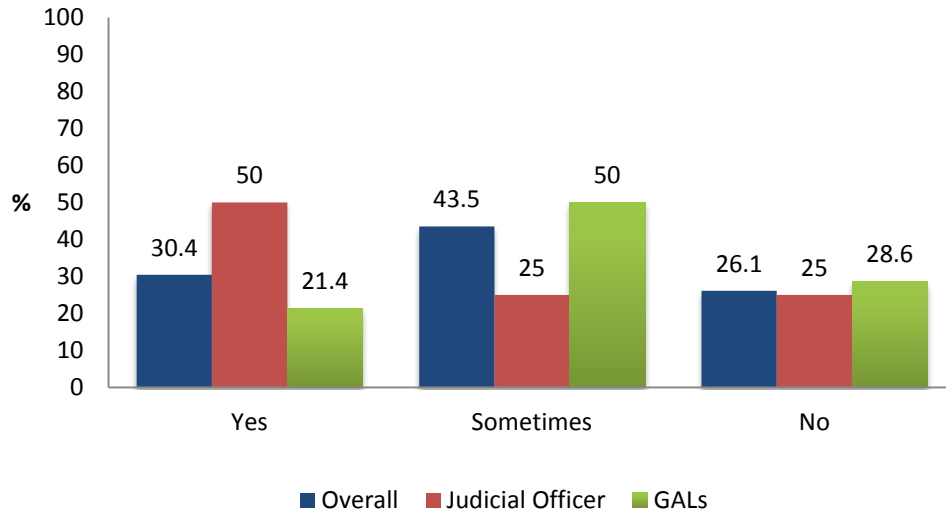
Those who indicated that they allow or request youth to speak in chambers was largely determined by youths' request and/or youths' explanation regarding their need to speak in private. Among stakeholders who reported that they *never* engage in this practice explained the necessity of sensitive and important information to be placed on public record in open court.

### Collaboration

Since collaboration is especially important for stakeholders to engage in, participants were asked to assess if they believed there was adequate collaboration in their jurisdictions. The largest percentage of stakeholders (43.5%) reported that adequate collaboration occurred only *sometimes*

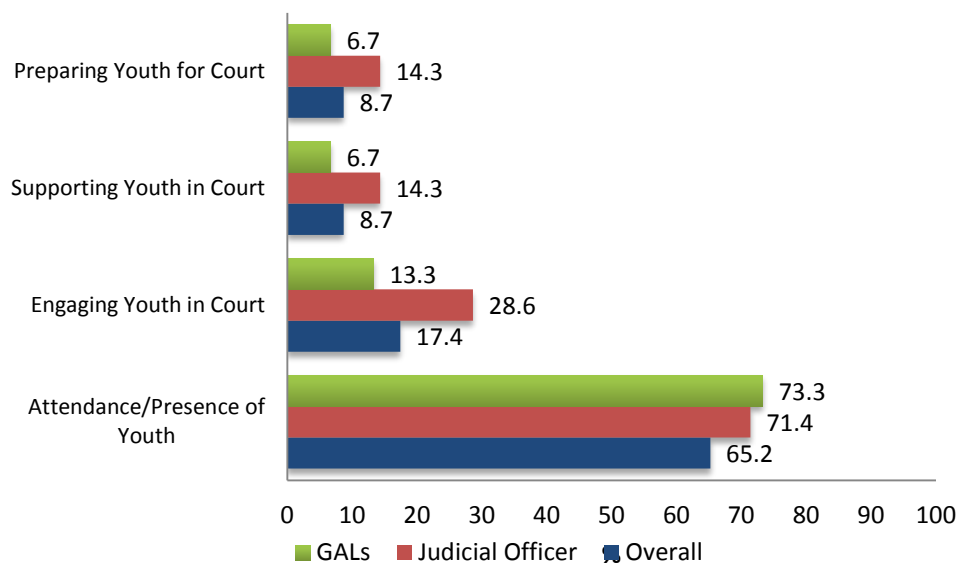
(Figure 10). Among roles, judicial officers were more likely to report there was adequate collaboration than GALs (50% versus 21.4%).

**Figure 10. Adequate Collaboration**



Participants were finally asked to identify the respective area of youth engagement that they felt needed to be addressed to move their work forward (Figure 9). Overall (and among stakeholders), *youth’s presence* was identified as a focus (65.2%). This was followed by *engaging youth in court proceedings* (17.4%).

**Figure 9. Biggest Issue of Youth Engagement**



# Youth Survey Results



## Methods

### Attitudes

To assess attitudes and perceptions regarding their own engagement, youth surveys asked a range of questions. Youth were first asked whether they understood the purpose of going to court for their hearings. All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Yes, 2=Sometimes, and 3=No. Participants were asked if they would like to attend court in the future. All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Yes, 2=Maybe, and 3=No. In addition, youth were asked to rate their agreement to various statements including: *I'm glad I go to my hearings, Court was like I thought it would be, and I don't like it when I have to go to my hearings*. All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Agree, 2=Disagree and 3=I Don't Know. Respondents finally were asked to identify how going into the courtroom made them feel. Descriptive answer choices were provided, as well as, an additional "other" category to allow youth to write their own feelings/words.

### Current Practices

Youth were then asked a range of questions related to current practices. Respondents were asked the frequency to which they attend their court hearings. All responses were made using a 5-point scale in which 1=Every Time and 5=Never.

To be able to draw comparisons among the stakeholder survey, there was a variety of questions related to the components of youth engagement including: 1.) encouragement to come to court, 2.) support of youth in court, 3.) engagement with youth in court, and 4.) preparation of youth for court.

To assess encouragement, youth were asked to identify the individuals whom inform them of their next hearings. In addition, youth were asked to rate their agreement to various statements including: *I understand that I am welcome to come to court and I know when my next court hearing will be*. All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Agree, 2=Disagree and 3=I Don't Know.

To assess whether youth felt supported in court, youth were asked to rate how often judicial officers and GALs engage in various practices with them. These included how often youth felt the judge listened to them and how often youth felt comfortable asking their GAL questions. All responses were made using a 4-point scale in which 1=Yes, 2=Sometimes, 3=No and 4=I Don't Know. In addition, youth were asked to rate their agreement to various statements including: *The judge uses words I don't understand, My GAL helps me to understand things in court, I feel supported by my GAL, and I feel supported by the judge*. All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Agree, 2=Disagree and 3=I Don't Know.

To assess engagement of youth in court, youth were asked the frequency to which they communicate with the judge in court, as well as, with their GALs before and after court. All responses were made using a 5-point scale where 1=Every Time and 5=Never. In addition, youth were asked to rate their agreement to various statements including: *The judge has offered to talk to me separately (not in front of everyone), my GAL asks questions about my life, and the judge asks me questions*. All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Agree, 2=Disagree and 3=I Don't Know.

To assess preparation of youth for court, youth were asked whether GALs met with them before and after their court hearings. All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Yes, 2=Sometimes, and 3=No. In addition, youth were asked to rate their agreement to various statements including: *I know what to expect before I come to court* and *I understand what happens in court*.

### **Other Practices**

Youth were asked questions to assess the extent they were invited to engage in other means of communication to determine if they have ever talked with the judge in chambers. Participants were also asked to name the locations they have ever talked with the judge. Responses options were provided and included: only in court, only in judge's chambers, or both. An additional "other" category was available for 'free-response' answers.

Youth were asked if have ever been allowed to write a letter to the judge instead of speaking in open court. All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Yes, 2=No 3=I Don't Know. Lastly, participants were asked whether the judge has offered to talk to them seperately (not in front of everyone). All responses were made using a 3-point scale in which 1=Agree, 2=Disagree, and 3=I Don't Know.

## Results

### Demographics

Two youth from the second judicial district participated in the youth survey. Survey participants identified themselves as being male (50%) and female (50%). Youth were between the ages of 16 and 17.

### Attitudes

- Both (100%) youth indicated that they understood the purpose of coming to court for their hearings and would like to come to court in the future.
- Youth identified that coming to court made them feel: (1) nervous and (1) relevant.
- One youth was glad they came to court and liked coming to court.
- One youth indicated that court was not how they thought it was going to be.

### Current Practices

- All youth indicated that they had gone to court where things about their case were discussed with a judge and their GAL.
- One youth indicated that they go to court ***every hearing***, while one indicated they have gone ***a few times***.
- Transportation was identified as a barrier for youth's presence.

### Encouragement

- Youth identified judicial officers and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) as individuals who informed them of their hearings.
- All youth indicated that they agreed with the statement: *I understand I am welcome to come to court and I know when my next court hearing will be.*

### Support

- All youth indicated that they felt the judge listened to them and felt comfortable asking their GAL questions.
- All youth indicated that the judge used words they understood.
- Youth responded affirmatively that they felt supported by the judicial officer and their GAL.
- One youth indicated that GALs ***sometimes*** help them when they don't understand something in court.

### Engagement

- Youth (100%) indicated that they talk to the judge ***every time*** they come to court. They also indicated that they only talk to judicial officers in the courtroom.
- All youth indicated that they have written a letter to the judge; however, all youth also indicated that the judicial officer has not offered to talk to them separately.
- One youth indicated that ***sometimes*** GALs ask questions about their life.

### Preparation

- All respondents indicated that they talk to their GALs before and after court. However, one youth indicated that their GAL does *not* tell them what happened if they don't come to court.
- Both youth reported that they understand what happens in court; however, only one youth indicated that they know what to expect *before* coming to court.

### Discussion of Youth Surveys

Youth surveys were limited in number, therefore, survey findings could not be generalized. However, these findings provide an introduction to understand how youth may feel about their engagement in their own dependency cases . Youth in this survey generally described their willingness and desire to be involved in court hearings. Improvements might be made by: 1) increasing the number and diversity of stakeholders that encourage youth to come to court, 2) providing transportation options to youth to come to court, 3) providing other means to communicate with stakeholders (i.e. invite youth to speak in chambers, allow youth to write a letter, etc.), and 4) improving efforts to better prepare youth to know what to expect prior to court hearings.

## Conclusion & future recommendations

### Conclusion of Findings

The topic of youth engagement in child abuse and dependency cases has become an important focus of improvement nationally and more specifically in Colorado. Several Colorado Best Practice Court Teams (BPCTs) are dedicated to addressing this issue. One of the main goals of this project was to provide a means to gain invaluable information from stakeholders and youth regarding their attitudes, perceptions, current practices, and suggested improvements to help inform and move youth engagement work forward. It is believed that this goal was accomplished as these findings provide a basis for jurisdictions to begin conversations on the identification of viable solutions.

For stakeholders, survey responses indicated that the vast majority believe that youth presence is the component of youth engagement that needs to continue to be prioritized. While stakeholders largely believe that youth presence is necessary and helpful; youth are not attending their hearing as frequently as they could. The biggest barriers that affect youth presence were identified as transportation and time out of school. Many jurisdictions have developed unique and practicable solutions to address these barriers include: (1) collaborating with various entities, (2) scheduling court hearings at convenient times, and (3) utilizing other methods or means of communication.

The largest percentage of GALs and judicial officers reported that they themselves engage in practices related to *supporting* youth in court more than any other components of youth engagement. In addition, stakeholders generally were more likely to rate themselves as employing youth engagement strategies more frequently than others. Collaboration was identified as a strategy to accomplish improving youth engagement broadly as it may help prioritize the issue, ensure all stakeholders are in agreement about their respective roles and responsibilities, and provide a basis for discussion on continuous solutions.

For youth, it appeared that they had attended court at least once, reported to understanding the purpose of going to court, and indicated that they would be willing to go to court in the future. Court experiences can affect youth in various ways. Youth participants generally indicated positive experiences when they attended court. These included: understanding they were welcome to come to court, feeling supported by judicial officers and GALs, understanding the decisions that were made, and understanding the court process more clearly. Similarly from the stakeholder survey, youth identified transportation as a barrier that affects their ability to be present.

### **Recommendations & Future Practice**

The benefits to youth engagement can be seen from the ability of youth to answer questions more easily, to speak for the things that are most important to them, and to provide guiding information to the court to assist stakeholders in safety, permanency and well-being decision-making.

Jurisdictions and courts can look to various national organizations to gain more information regarding youth engagement. For example, the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law Bar-Youth Empowerment Project has developed formal training packages and benchcards that provide meaningful guidance on appropriately involving children in their court hearings and case

plannings.<sup>2</sup> In addition, NCJFCJ's *Resource Guidelines*, a best practice recommendation guidebook, focuses on the development and articulation of best practices in the handling of child abuse and neglect cases. Some examples of guiding practices are outlined below for consideration.

#### *Encouragement to Come to Court*

- Courts can develop policies and protocols to ensure that children have the opportunity to attend all court events. This includes determining under what circumstances it is acceptable for a child to not be present at their dependency court hearing. For example, children can be excluded from particular parts or entire hearings if the proceeding raises unusually upsetting issues. If youth are attending part of their hearing, the judge can speak to the child about issues relating to permanency, placement, school, siblings, and other issues that are important to the child and when the judge discusses issues that will be detrimental to the child to hear, the child can be excused. This, again, allows the child to be involved but not hear potentially harmful information.
- In each hearing, the judge should inquire whether the child is present and, if not, why the child isn't present. This should be part of the judge's recognition on the record of all the parties who are present, which should include making note if the child is an infant or toddler and is in the courtroom for the hearing. The development of an agreed-upon policy and practice document enables all stakeholders to know this question is coming and to be prepared for it. The question also signals to the parties that the judge values the child's presence and recognizes the importance of having the child's input and empowering the child by allowing them to be involved in the decision-making process.
- When children are not present in court, the judge should ask why and make findings as to the reason the child is not present. If the judge does not find good cause for the child's absence, the case should be continued to an expedited time certain to secure the appearance of the child.
- The court should work with the agency and the caregivers to ensure the child has transportation to court.
- Hearings should be set for a specific time, if possible, in order to minimize the waiting time for the child and other participants. Sitting in a courthouse for several hours can dissuade a child from attending future court hearings. Additionally, time-certain hearings will cut down

---

2

[http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center\\_on\\_children\\_and\\_the\\_law/empowerment/hasten\\_youngchild.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/empowerment/hasten_youngchild.authcheckdam.pdf);

[http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center\\_on\\_children\\_and\\_the\\_law/empowerment/hasten\\_toddler.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/empowerment/hasten_toddler.authcheckdam.pdf);

[http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center\\_on\\_children\\_and\\_the\\_law/empowerment/hasten\\_schoolage.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/empowerment/hasten_schoolage.authcheckdam.pdf);

[http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center\\_on\\_children\\_and\\_the\\_law/empowerment/hasten\\_adolescent.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/empowerment/hasten_adolescent.authcheckdam.pdf);

on the number of people in the waiting area minimizing the chance of a child seeing a parent or caregiver they shouldn't see.

#### *Supporting Youth in Court*

- There should be a supportive person present to help the child with any upsetting information and to work through difficult feelings with the child. Children are understandably nervous and anxious about appearing in court and speaking to a judge. Having a familiar, trusted person with the child can relieve some of the anxiety and allow the child to speak more openly and have a more meaningful experience. This person can be a relative, the court appointed special advocate (CASA), mentor, teacher, or other trusted adult. Whether or not that individual can actually be present for the hearing will depend on the jurisdiction, but children feel comforted even knowing that the individual is in the building. To implement this policy component, assess how this may impact confidentiality and whether the court is open or can be opened by the judge.

#### *Engaging with Youth*

- Stakeholders should seek and participate in training on how to best engage children in court.
- Stakeholders should determine acceptable alternatives to a child's complete participation. The use of video technology may be an option to improve accessibility and may be able to be implemented at minimal costs. Many courtrooms are (or can easily be) equipped with internet access and video capabilities. Using such technology, the child can participate in the hearing from home or school. This will allow the child to be involved, while remaining in a familiar setting and without disrupting their schedule. Skype is an increasingly easy means of electronic participation in hearings.
- The child, with the assistance of their representative, can write a letter to the judge giving their input into decisions that the judge will make. Some jurisdictions have found forms with specific questions and requests for information or updates helpful in eliciting responses from children. Children must understand that this information will be provided to all parties.

#### *Preparing Youth for Court*

- Children should receive meaningful notice of their hearings. The development and use of child-friendly reminder notes can be an easy, cost-effective way to ensure youth are well-informed of their next hearings. In addition, most courts have a standard procedure for notifying the parties of each dependency hearing. Some place the burden on the court to provide such notice and others place the burden on the child welfare agency. In either case, however, seldom does the child get a personal, written invitation to attend the hearing. Children inconsistently receive informal oral notice from their social worker, attorney, CASA or foster parent. There should be a consistent and mandatory way that children receive notice of the hearings and invitation to attend, in language they can understand. These notices should go directly to the child in their placement, as well as followed-up by notice and invitation from the case worker, CASA, GAL, and the child's attorney.

- The way to ensure the most meaningful and least stressful court experience for a child is to properly prepare them for the hearing. The child's representative could role-play the hearing so the child knows what to expect and help the child decide what they going to say to the judge, learn how to talk to the judge, and learn about courtroom etiquette.
- Among other things, the child's representative should inform the child:
  - ❖ Who will be present and what their roles are.
  - ❖ What questions the judge is likely to ask.
  - ❖ What topics are likely to be discussed.
  - ❖ What information the judge gets from the various court reports.
  - ❖ Whether she will have the opportunity to speak with the judge.

#### *Other Practices*

- Following the hearing, the child may be confused or have questions. The child's representative should spend time with the child ensuring that they understands what was ordered, what's going to happen next, and when the next court hearing will be. The child's representative should allow the child to ask any questions right after the hearing and provide them contact information so if the child has questions later they can contact the representative. The foster parent should know what happened and how to get in contact with the child's representative if the child has questions.
- If the child wants to speak to the judge without being in the courtroom, or the courtroom is unsuitable for another reason, the judge may, adhering to the jurisdiction's laws, court and ethics rules, speak to the child in chambers. The informal setting may be more comfortable for the child. For more information about Ex Parte Communications with children, please see *Ex Parte Communications between Children and Judges in Dependency Proceedings* available at [http://www.americanbar.org/groups/child\\_law/projects\\_initiatives/empowerment/youthincourt.html](http://www.americanbar.org/groups/child_law/projects_initiatives/empowerment/youthincourt.html).
- The collaborative team should consider ways of getting feedback from children on their experiences in the courtroom to assess ways of improving their experience in the future.



## District Specific Result findings

# 1<sup>st</sup> Judicial District Stakeholder summary 2016 findings

## Gilpin & Jefferson County

Total Number of Hearings (FY2016)	Total Number of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2015)
160	78	48.8	36.1

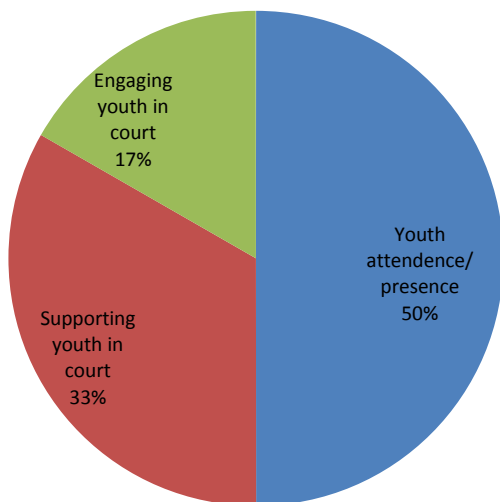
\*Data from Youth in Court Report FY 2016, Q1 Q2

### Demographics

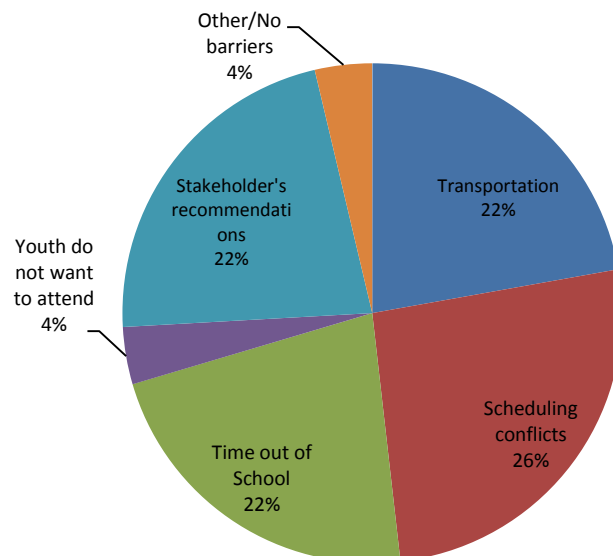


Four participants took the stakeholder survey. Survey participants identified themselves as guardian ad-litem (50%) and judicial officers (50%). The majority of participants (75%) overall had six or more years of experience in the child abuse and neglect field.

### Biggest Issue of Youth Engagement



### Biggest Barrier to Youth Engagement



- Youth presence/attendance was indicated as being the biggest issue in the first judicial district followed by supporting youth in court.
- Time out of school was identified as the biggest barrier to youth coming to court followed by transportation.
- Strategies currently used in the first judicial district to overcome barriers included: (1) allowing youth to appear by telephone, (2) transportation by various stakeholders and entities, and (3) judicial officers scheduling youth off docket to accommodate youth's schedule and preferences.

### Attitudes

- 62.5% of stakeholders reported that youth should be present in the court. Those who responded in the affirmative felt that it allowed youth to feel empowered and a part of the conversation.
- 25% of stakeholders indicated that youth **often** come to court
- 75% of stakeholders indicated that youth's presence **is helpful** in decision-making *to any extent*. The reasons for this included: (1) it allowed an opportunity for youth's wishes/needs to be clarified and (2) youth seem to feel heard.

- 50% of stakeholders indicated that there is adequate collaboration among stakeholders, while 25% indicated that this is **sometimes** the case.
- 37.5% of respondents indicated that they **never** allow or request youth to speak in chambers. For those who responded they never engage in this practice, the main reason included the need for conversations to be on the record and the lack of ability for courts to record in chambers at this time.

## Current Practices

Table 1. Self-Assessment in Practices Related to Youth Engagement *			
Practice Topic			
	% Stakeholders (Themselves)	% Stakeholders (Others)	% Difference
<b>Encourage Youth to Come to Court</b>	75	37.5	37.5
<b>Support Youth in Court</b>	87.5	37.5	50
<b>Engage Youth in Court Proceedings</b>	62.5	37.5	25
<b>Prepare Youth for Court</b>	62.5	12.5	50
<i>*Responses included in analysis if stakeholders respondent Always or Often</i>			

- The practice that stakeholders indicated that they **always** or **often** engage in the most was regarding supporting youth in court.
- The largest variability between how stakeholders rated themselves compared to how stakeholders rated others involved practices that support youth in court and prepare youth for court. This suggests that improvements to these two areas might be beneficial.

## Suggestions for Improvement by First Judicial District Stakeholders

- 62.5% of stakeholders indicated that they would be interested in receiving training regarding youth engagement.

### *Encouraging Youth to Attend Court*

- “It needs to become the accepted way of proceedings. Stakeholders throughout the system need to accept that it is best for kids to come to court.”
- “The entire team needs to be invested in the belief that youth should be encouraged to participate at the level they are most comfortable.”

### *Supporting Youth in Court*

- “Education for all stakeholders, have enough kids appear that it becomes routine.”
- “We need a child friendly waiting room.”

### *Engaging Youth In Court*

- “We need more magistrates so they have more time to engage youth in hearings.”

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Judicial District Stakeholder summary 2016 findings

## Denver County

Total Number of Hearings (FY2016)	Total Number of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2015)
149	66	44.9	42.3

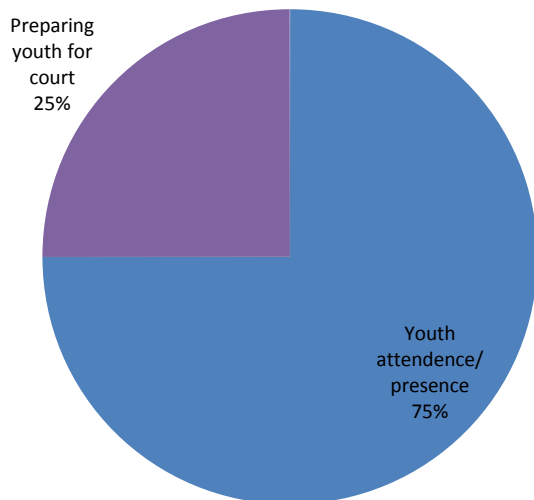
\*Data from Youth in Court Report FY 2016, Q1 Q2

### Demographics

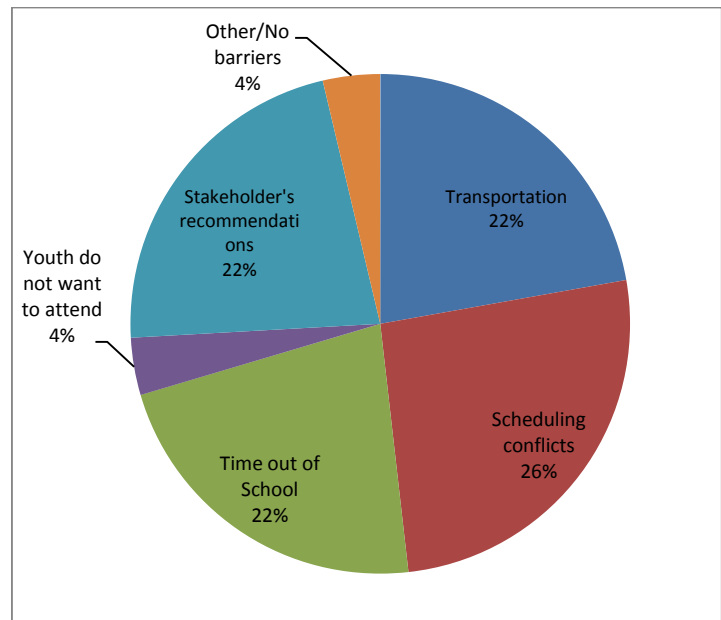


Six participants took the stakeholder survey. Survey participants identified themselves as guardian ad-litem (100%). The majority of participants (66.7%) overall had over ten years of experience in the child abuse and neglect field.

### Biggest Issue of Youth Engagement



### Biggest Barrier to Youth Engagement



- Youth presence/attendance was indicated as being the biggest issue in the second judicial district followed by preparing youth for court.
- Scheduling conflicts was identified as the biggest barrier to youth coming to court followed by transportation, time out of school, and stakeholders' recommendations.
- Strategies currently used in the second judicial district to overcome barriers include: (1) various stakeholders/entities transporting youth and (2) scheduling hearings when transportation was available.

### Attitudes

- 50% of stakeholders reported that youth should attend their court hearings. An additional 50% responded that this was **sometimes** appropriate. Among those that reported in the affirmative, beliefs largely centered

around the youth’s right to attend their own hearing and the provision of opportunity to empower youth when they are included.

- 16.7% of stakeholders indicated that youth **often** come to court with an additional 33.3% reporting that youth **never** attend their hearings.
- 100% of stakeholders indicated that youth’s presence *is helpful* in decision-making *to any extent*. The most prominent reasons included: (1) youth have an equal voice in the case, (2) youth seem to feel heard, and (3) youth have a better understanding of the court process.
- 66.7% of stakeholders indicated that there is only **sometimes** adequate collaboration among stakeholders, while 33.3% indicated that this is **never** the case.
- 50% of respondents indicated that they **never** request youth to speak in chambers with an additional 50% indicating that they **sometimes** request this practice. For those who responded that they **never** request meetings, the reasons included (1) other parties objections and/or (2) the need to request such hearings being minimal or infrequent.

### Current Practices

Practice Topic			
	% Stakeholders (Themselves)	% Stakeholders (Others)	% Difference
<b>Encourage Youth to Come to Court</b>	100	0	37.5
<b>Support Youth in Court</b>	100	60	40
<b>Engage Youth in Court Proceedings</b>	100	33.3	66.7
<b>Prepare Youth for Court</b>	100	33.3	66.7

*\* Responses included in analysis if stakeholders respondent Always or Often*

- All stakeholders indicated they themselves **always** or **often** employ practices related to every component of youth engagement.
- The largest variability between how stakeholders rated themselves compared to others involved practices that engage youth in court and prepare youth for court. This suggests that improvements to these two areas might be beneficial.

### Suggestions for Improvement by Second Judicial District Stakeholders

- 100% of stakeholders indicated that they might be interested in receiving training regarding youth engagement.

#### *Encouraging Youth to Attend Court*

- “Having a set time when hearings with kids attending get priority hearing. Get them in and out quickly, and not have to sit and wait for everyone in custody, interpreters or whatever else the court calls ahead of them. Incredibly disrespectful to have youth come and then make them sit and wait. I can think of no stronger message that you are not that important than to make them sit and wait.”
- “Maybe an hour watching other person’s cases the week BEFORE their own.”
- “Youth can and should be encouraged system-wide to come to court. All parties can enter into the discussion and set the expectation of youth appearing.”

### *Supporting Youth in Court*

- “The entire culture needs to be made more welcoming to youth in court. They need to be seen as a regular, welcome party, not as an anomaly. Regular methods of transportation should be set so they know that opportunity to come to court is there for them. They should be acknowledged in the courtroom, heard first, allowed to speak, and get fair answers to their questions.”
- “The ones in custody of are often mistreated around court including strip searches and missing meals. The court should use its authority to limit these.”

### *Engaging Youth In Court*

- “Directly engaging youth in court proceedings would be helpful. If the judicial officers addressed them from the bench and asked truly meaningful, insightful questions about the issues on the youth’s mind, that would help.”
- “Transportation is a major issue. It is also clear that we need NOT to bring the youth to court if there are significant truancy issues. Our judges are doing a “Benchmark” hearing in the late afternoon after the rest of the docket and food and drink is served while we go over the emancipation issues once in the year before emancipation, this works well.”

### *Engaging Youth In Court*

- “Mostly with myself, the GAL, but also I wish other stakeholders would tell youth that the judge will not like you to do that.”
- “Social workers, therapists, CASAs, parents, RPCs, the whole family team should be trained to think more in terms of youth appearing in court. Any member of a child’s team should be prepared to answer questions about youth in court when the youth asks so the youth is included, rather than excluded. There should never be a question about whether a youth should appear in court.”

# 4th Judicial District Stakeholder summary 2016 findings

## El Paso & Teller County

Total Number of Hearings (FY2016)	Total Number of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2015)
146	85	79	49.5

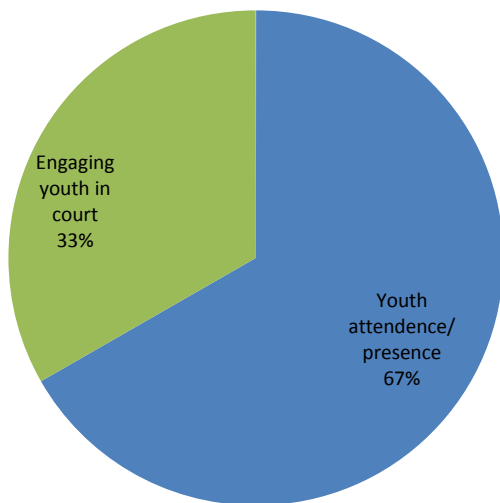
\*Data from Youth in Court Report FY 2016, Q1 Q2

### Demographics

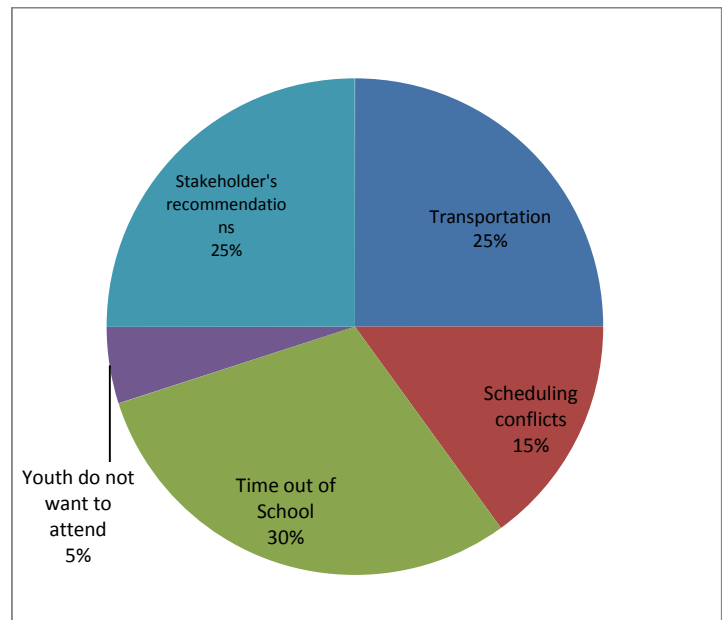


Six participants took the stakeholder survey. Survey participants identified themselves as guardian ad-litem (66.7%) and judicial officers (33.3%). Half of participants (50%) had six or more years of experience in the child abuse and neglect field.

### Biggest Issue of Youth Engagement



### Biggest Barrier to Youth Engagement



- Youth presence/attendance was indicated as being the biggest issue in the fourth judicial district followed by engaging youth in court.
- Time out of school was identified as the biggest barrier to youth coming to court followed by transportation and stakeholder's recommendations.
- Strategies currently used to overcome barriers in the fourth judicial district included: (1) court orders to have youth present, (2) various stakeholders willing to transport youth, and (3) scheduling hearings later in the day to avoid school disruptions.

### Attitudes

- 66.7% of stakeholders reported that youth **should** be present in court. Of those that replied in the affirmative, beliefs included that it provides: (1) youth with a sense of input and control, (2) allows stakeholders to see the individual that is impacted by decisions made in court, and (3) youth can handle more than they get credit for. Reasons reported from stakeholders who responded that youth presence is only **sometimes** appropriate included whether the hearing was directly about the youth and the potential exposure to trauma when seeing other parties on the case.
- 16.7% of stakeholders reported that youth **often** come to hearings.
- 100% of stakeholders indicated that youth’s presence *is helpful* in decision-making *to any extent*. The most prominent reasons included: (1) youth’s wishes/needs are clarified and (2) youth seem to feel heard.
- 16.7% of stakeholders indicated that there is adequate collaboration among stakeholders, while 66.7% indicated that this is **sometimes** the case.
- 33.3% of respondents indicated that they **never** allow or request youth to speak in chambers. For those who responded they **never** engage in this practice, the reasons included the need for conversations to be on the record.

### Current Practices

Practice Topic			
	% Stakeholders (Themselves)	% Stakeholders (Others)	% Difference
<b>Encourage Youth to Come to Court</b>	100	83.3	16.7
<b>Support Youth in Court</b>	100	100	0
<b>Engage Youth in Court Proceedings</b>	100	83.3	16.7
<b>Prepare Youth for Court</b>	66.7	83.3	-16.6

*\*Responses included in analysis if stakeholders respondent Always or Often*

- The practice stakeholders indicated that they themselves **always** or **often** engage in included practices that help to encourage, support and engage with youth in court.
- The largest variability between how stakehodlers rated themselves compared to others involved practices that prepare youth in court. Stakeholders indicated that others **always** or **often** prepare youth for court more than they do. This suggests that stakeholders themselves can improve their own practices to assist youth in knowing what the court process entails.

### Suggestions for Improvement by Fourth Judicial District Stakeholders

- 100% of stakeholders indicated that they would be interested in receiving training regarding youth engagement.

#### Encouraging Youth to Attend Court

- “All professionals”
- “Caseworkersk, foster parents, and/or placement facilities transportation.”
- “Caseworker logisitics depending on where child/youth resides from DHS/DSS building and where coworker resides.”
- “I think the Court being careful about how they address kids in Court helps. I think it is devastating to kids to come to Court and say what they want and then have a different decision handed down. It



softens the blow if the judicial officers gives some reason why the decisions is not what the youth requested. Since most kids in out of home placement have already had to change schools, missing schools is a big deal to many kids. Having court hearings later in the day would help reduce the time a kid is out of school and might change some youth's willingness to come."

- "It is a responsibility all stakeholders are responsible for. I appreciate it when stakeholders remind me, when we're setting future court dates to keep the youth's schedule in mind."
- "Sometimes factoring in a youth's schedule when setting court dates."

#### *Supporting Youth in Court*

- "Being more emphatic in insisting on their presence and requiring an explanation if youth are not there. Set the bar."
- "Court Staff"
- "Co-workers interactions with youth prior to court attendance/participation."
- "Everyone can do more. Most importantly, the youth needs to feel that coming to Court was worth their time."

#### *Engaging Youth In Court*

- "The bench needs to set the expectation. GALs and CASA can give court ideas regarding something to discuss/engage the youth about."

#### *Preparing Youth for Court*

- "I look primarily to all stakeholders, GAL, CASA and caseworker to make sure youth knows about the court hearing and prep them regarding expectations ahead of time"

# 7th Judicial District Stakeholder summary 2016 findings

## Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose, Ouray & San Miguel County

Total Number of Hearings (FY2016)	Total Number of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2015)
33	14	38.9	45.2

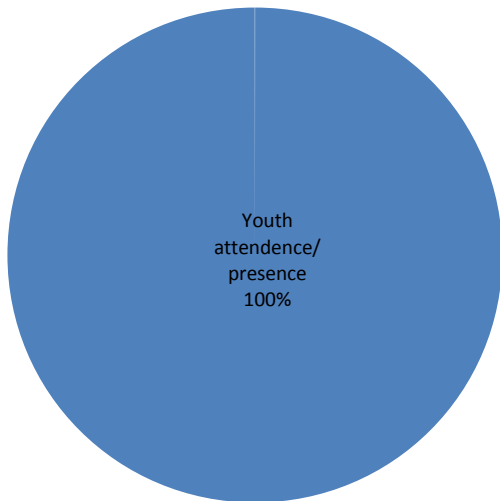
\*Data from Youth in Court Report FY 2016, Q1 Q2

### Demographics

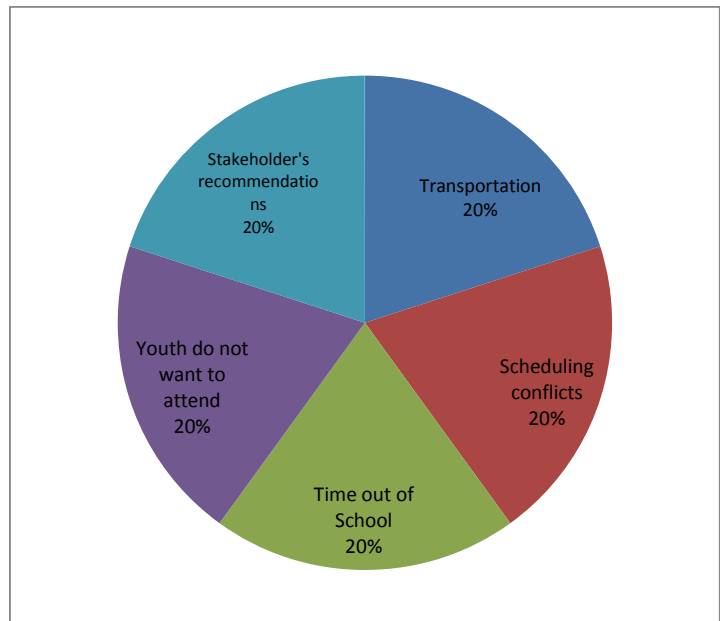


One participant took the stakeholder survey. The survey participant identified themselves as a guardian ad- litem with over ten years of experience in in the child abuse and neglect field.

### Biggest Issue of Youth Engagement



### Biggest Barrier to Youth Engagement



- Youth presence/attendance was indicated as being the biggest issue in the seventh judicial district.
- Transportation, scheduling conflicts, time out of school, stakeholder’s recommendations and youth’s wishes to not attend were all seen as barriers to youth coming to court.
- Strategies currently used in the seventh judicial district to overcome barriers were limited . It was suggested that the district consider strategic ways to transport youth and be cognizant of timings of hearings.

## Attitudes

- The survey participant reported that youth should be present in court **sometimes**.
- The respondent indicated that youth **sometimes** come to court.
- Youth's presence was indicated as **sometimes** helpful in decision-making. They believed it allowed youth to: (1) clarify wishes or needs, (2) feel heard, and (3) gain a better understanding of their case and the court process.
- The survey participant indicated that there is **never** adequate collaboration among stakeholders.
- Requesting youth to speak in chambers was a practice that this respondent indicated **never** occurs.

## Current Practices

Practice Topic			
	% Stakeholders (Themselves)	% Stakeholders (Others)	% Difference
<b>Encourage Youth to Come to Court</b>	0	0	0
<b>Support Youth in Court</b>	100	100	0
<b>Engage Youth in Court Proceedings</b>	100	100	0
<b>Prepare Youth for Court</b>	100	0	100

*\*Responses included in analysis if stakeholders respondent Always or Often*

- The practices that the stakeholder indicated that they themselves **always** or **often** engage in included supporting, engaging, and preparing youth for court.
- The practice that the participant identified that they and others do not frequently engage in included encouraging youth to come to court.
- Additionally, the participant believed that other stakeholders could improve efforts to prepare youth for court including ensuring youth know what happens in court, the various roles/entities involved, and what decisions can be made prior to them coming to court.

# 18<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Stakeholder summary 2016 findings

## Arapahoe, Elbert & Lincoln County

Total Number of Hearings (FY2016)	Total Number of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2015)
94	46	48.9	35.9

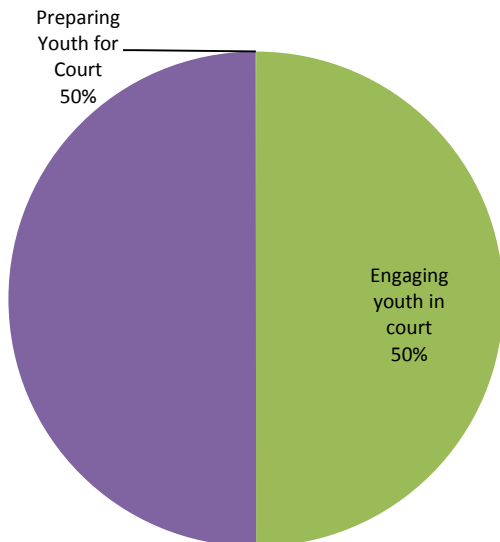
\*Data from Youth in Court Report FY 2016, Q1 Q2

### Demographics

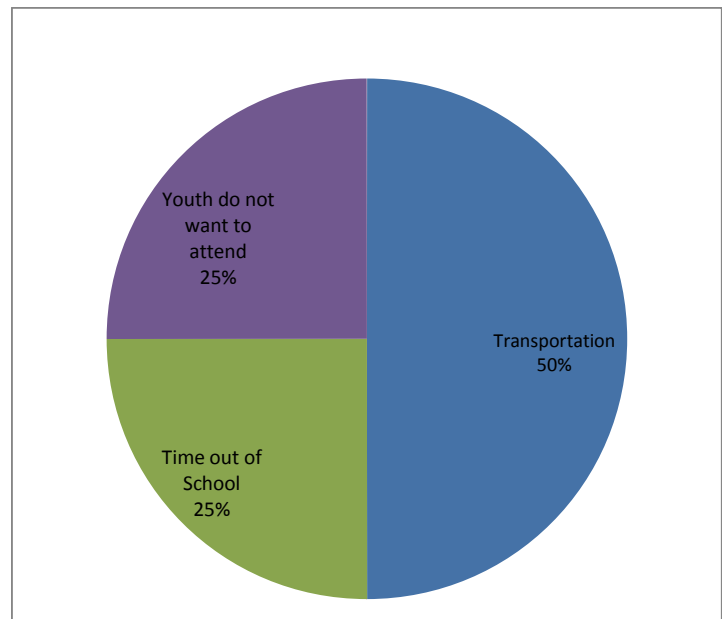


Three participants took the stakeholder survey. Survey participants identified themselves as judicial officers (66.7%) and guardian ad-litem (33.3%). All participants had between 2 to 3 years of experience in the child abuse and neglect field.

### Biggest Issue of Youth Engagement



### Biggest Barrier to Youth Engagement



- Engagement of youth in court and preparing youth for court were identified as being the biggest issues in the eighteenth judicial district.
- Transportation was identified as the biggest barrier to youth engagement followed by time out of school and youth's wishes to not attend court.
- Strategies currently used to overcome barriers in this district included collaborative efforts to resolve transportation issues. Suggestions to improve the preparation of youth included the development of an online training video for youth to be able to access to show them what attending a hearing is like.

### Attitudes

- 50% of stakeholders reported that youth **should** be present in court; while 50% indicated that presence was appropriate only **sometimes**. Among those that believe youth should be present believe that it provides youth with a sense of control and voice. Among stakeholders who reported that youths' presence is only

sometimes appropriate largely believed that the well-being of youth and the potential of exposure to triggering should be considered.

- 50% of stakeholders reported that youth **often** come to hearings.
- 100% indicated that youth’s *presence is helpful* in decision-making *to any extent*. The most prominent reasons included youth’s wishes/needs are clarified, youth seem to feel heard and youth understand their own case and the court process.
- 50% indicated that there is adequate collaboration among stakeholders, while 50% indicated that this is **never** the case.
- All respondents indicated that they **never** allow or request youth to speak in chambers. Reasons for this included that meeting in open court is the proper procedure to avoid ex-parte communication.

### Current Practices

Table 1. Self-Assessment in Practices Related to Youth Engagement *			
Practice Topic			
	% Stakeholders (Themselves)	% Stakeholders (Others)	% Difference
<b>Encourage Youth to Come to Court</b>	100	50	50
<b>Support Youth in Court</b>	100	50	50
<b>Engage Youth in Court Proceedings</b>	100	100	0
<b>Prepare Youth for Court</b>	100	100	0
<i>* Responses included in analysis if stakeholders respondent Always or Often</i>			

- The largest percentage of stakeholders indicated that they **always** or **often** engage in practices that help to encourage, support and engage and prepare youth for court.
- The largest variability between how stakeholders rated themselves compared to others involved practices that encourage youth to come to court and support youth in court. This suggests improvements might be made by stakeholders to ensure that they are extending invitations to youth to come to court and ensuring that youth feel comfortable when they are present.

### Suggestions for Improvement by Eighteenth Judicial District Stakeholders

- 100% of stakeholders indicated that they would be interested in receiving training regarding youth engagement.

#### *Encouraging Youth to Attend Court*

- “Create a video available on state website and/or Youtube that shows from the perspective of the youth, what it is like to go into a courthouse, go through security, go to the courtroom, who is there, where they sit, that they ask, etc. Colorado needs to approach youth involvement with their own child in mind, because simply, these are our children.”

#### *Supporting Youth in Court*

- “The walk-thru video made available with links from OCR, CASA, DHS, etc.”

# 20th Judicial District Stakeholder summary 2016 findings

## Boulder County

Total Number of Hearings (FY2016)	Total Number of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2016)	% of Children Present (FY2015)
19	14	21.1	32.7

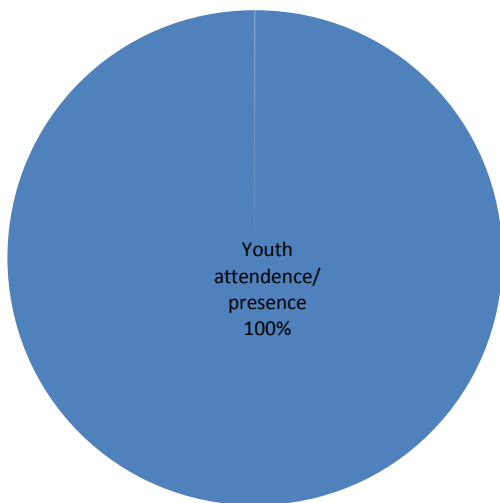
*\*Data from Youth in Court Report FY 2016, Q1 Q2*

### Demographics

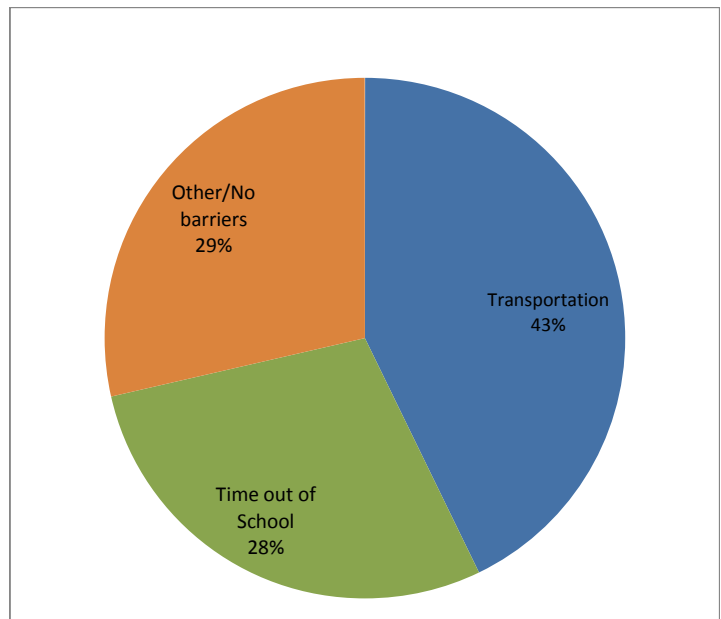


Four participants took the stakeholder survey. Survey participants identified themselves as guardian ad- litem (50%) and judicial officers (50%). The majority of participants (50%) overall had over ten years of experience in the child abuse and neglect field.

### Biggest Issue of Youth Engagement



### Biggest Barrier to Youth Engagement



- Youth presence/attendance was indicated as being the biggest issue in the twentieth judicial district.
- Transportation was identified as the biggest barrier to youth coming to court followed by time out of school.
- Strategies to overcome barriers included various stakeholders willing to transport youth. Requiring court orders was thought to be an option to assist courts with this issue in the future.

### Attitudes

- 25% of stakeholders responded in the affirmative that youth **should** be present in court; while 75% reported that this is only **sometimes** appropriate. Reasons that it was only *sometimes* appropriate included the age, cognitive abilities, and youth’s wishes to not attend.
- 25% indicated that youth **often** come to court.

- 100% indicated that youth’s presence *is helpful* in decision-making *to any extent*. The most prominent reasons included youths’ presence helps to: clarify youths’ wishes/needs, allows youth to feel heard, and provides youth with a better understanding of their case and the process.
- 50% indicated that there is adequate collaboration among stakeholders, while 50% indicated that this is **sometimes** the case.
- 25% of respondents indicated that they **never** allow or request youth to speak in chambers. For those who responded they *never* engage in this practice, reasons included it is up to the GALs or child to request such practices for it to be considered.

**Current Practices**

Table 1. Self-Assessment in Practices Related to Youth Engagement *			
Practice Topic			
	% Stakeholders (Themselves)	% Stakeholders (Others)	% Difference
<b>Encourage Youth to Come to Court</b>	50	25	25
<b>Support Youth in Court</b>	100	66.7	33.3
<b>Engage Youth in Court Proceedings</b>	66.7	33.4	33.3
<b>Prepare Youth for Court</b>	66.7	66.7	0
* Responses included in analysis if stakeholders respondent Always or Often			

- The largest percentage of stakeholders indicated that they themselves **always** or **often** engage in practices that help to *support* youth in court.
- The largest variability between how stakeholders rated themselves compared to others involved practices that *support* youth in court and *engage* youth in court. This suggests that improvements among stakeholders to these two areas might be beneficial.

**Suggestions for Improvement by Twentieth Judicial District Stakeholders**

- 62.5% of stakeholders indicated that they would be interested in receiving training regarding youth engagement.

*Encouraging Youth to Attend Court*

- “DHHS”
- “Each district should be encouraged to develop their own strategy that meets the needs of that district and not be forced into any cookie cutter method that just looks good on paper. “
- “The department and transportation.”

*Supporting Youth in Court*

- “Continual engagement with all stakeholders, including CASA and foster parents to get kids to court and then to provide adequate processing opportunities after court.”
- “I think everyone is trying their best to make youth feel supported in court.”
- “Transportation. If a hearing is set and the kids are expected, the department needs to figure it out as the GAL is already in Court for other hearings and usually cant transport.”

*Engaging Youth In Court*

- “Everyone needs to be able to hear what the youth though of Court and share those insights.”