

The South Dakota Juvenile Justice System Guidebook for Youth and Parents

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Summary:

Dr. Susan Randall, Executive Director of the South Dakota Coalition for Children (SDCC), developed the *South Dakota Juvenile Justice System Guidebook for Youth and Parents* as a means of simplifying and clarifying a very complex legal system. Created with input from a wide range of stakeholders and experts, the easy-to-read guidebook covers the state juvenile justice system, law enforcement, detention, court and the Department of Corrections. In addition, it provides advice for youth, definitions of legal terminology and additional resources. The *Guidebook* has become a huge success, and SDCC is currently preparing to produce the third edition.

Background:

At a South Dakota Coalition for Children Policy Committee meeting, several attorneys and a juvenile court judge on the committee noted that many attorneys were unfamiliar with the specific laws and regulations relating to the South Dakota juvenile justice system, as their law school training had only briefly touched upon the issue. The Committee members realized that if lawyers themselves had questions, it was highly unlikely that children and their parents had any hope of understanding their legal protections. The committee concluded that an expertly written guidebook could help children, parents and advocates become aware of the legal process and the rights of children in the state.

Key Planning Elements:

- **Step 1: Funding.** As a new organization, SDCC was relatively unknown to funders. In addition, South Dakota has a limited number of foundations, which generally give modest sums of money. Four foundations were approached and each contributed to the total cost of the project.
- **Step 2: The Team.** A volunteer *Guidebook* workgroup was formed to assist in research and writing. The seven-member group consisted of attorneys, a college professor, a director of a juvenile shelter, a retired court services director and a parent. Three of the committee members served on SDCC's Board

of Directors and had initially proposed development of the *Guidebook*. One member was selected by the Trial Lawyers Association and the remaining members were recommended by SDCC board and staff to fill identified representational categories.

- **Step 3: The Parents.** Telephone interviews were conducted with parents of children in the juvenile justice system. The parents shared their perspectives on the system — what they wished they had known and advice for other parents. The list of willing parents was legally obtained with the help of a lawyer and a juvenile shelter director, both of whom were workgroup members.
- **Step 4: The Kids.** Three listening sessions with youth who had been involved in the juvenile justice system were held in major cities across South Dakota. Participant recruitment consisted of newspaper advertisements and strategically distributed flyers. The facilitator for each one-hour confidential session asked two major questions: “What do you wish you had known when you came in contact with the juvenile justice system?” and “What advice would you give to other youth?”
- **Step 5: The Experts.** The group conducted interviews with three judges, a state’s attorney, court services staff and a public defender, who were also asked to be expert reviewers of a draft.
- **Step 6: Writing.** The workgroup developed a table of contents and divided up the sections.
- **Step 7: Editing.** A draft of the *Guidebook* was sent to volunteer readers for review and final edits were completed.
- **Step 8: Printing.** A graphic designer converted the text into an appealing booklet form. Five thousand copies of the *Guidebook* were printed.
- **Step 9: Publicity.** A press conference was held in two major cities.
- **Step 10: Distribution.** The *Guidebooks* and cover letters inviting recipients to request more were distributed via mail to key stakeholders. These recipients included judges, court services, law enforcement, libraries, juvenile detention centers and court service workers.

Staff Time:

- Dr. Susan Randall guided the entire nine-month project from funding through to final release during a time when she was the only professional staffer.
- The total cost of the project was \$16,000. Funding was secured in small amounts from various groups, with an average grant of \$3,200.

Outcomes:

- The first printing of 5,000 was exhausted in six months. A second edited edition was released by SDCC one year later with 10,000 printed. Plans are now underway for development of a third edition.
- The *Guidebook* is considered to be the key resource for anyone interested in the South Dakota juvenile justice system. It is used by children, parents, researchers, lawyers, advocates, lobbyists, practitioners, etc.
- An unexpected outcome is that SDCC, previously new to the field, is now often called upon as an expert resource and has an incredible amount of credibility in juvenile justice advocacy.

“The *Guidebook* is a worthwhile public service that can help shine the light of understanding on a complex system that impacts children. It can support effective advocacy for a child. Children in every state would benefit from such a resource.” - **Dr. Susan Randall**