

**MANN CHILD POLICY EXTERN** **Reem Asaad** A junior double majoring in Anthropology and International Studies and minoring in Childhood Studies and English, and with a goal of going to law school, Reem Asaad wanted to connect her interest in Anthropology with her desire to pursue a career as an attorney. Reem learned about the Child Policy Initiative of the Schubert Center for Child Studies and was elated to find the perfect fit that would connect all of her academic interests. After taking Introduction to Child Policy in the fall of 2008, she was hooked on policy and eager to learn more about the legislative process. Reem applied and was selected for a prestigious Mann Child Policy Externship to work with Voices for Ohio's Children. There, she worked on the Juvenile Justice Initiative under the mentorship of Yvonne C. Hunnicutt, Director of Operations and Policy Associate.



Voices' Juvenile Justice Initiative is focused on reducing reliance on institutionalization and shifting to community-based rehabilitation. After becoming well versed in the Juvenile Justice Initiative policy recommendations, Reem developed a white paper elucidating their importance. She researched alternatives to incarceration for juveniles in Ohio with a focus on the range of programs offered. She learned about community-based programs, examined the cost variation between rehabilitation options, and produced a policy brief on the cost-comparison of dispositional options. In addition to research and writing, she had the opportunity to attend legislative meetings and was able to see advocacy in action.

**POLICY RESEARCH:  
THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM**

The American juvenile justice system was established to adjudicate and rehabilitate juveniles accused of committing delinquencies. There is no federal level juvenile justice system, instead there are 51 separate state systems, with each state having its own laws, judicial system and rehabilitation and corrections programs and facilities. The U.S. juvenile justice system was founded in the late 19th century on the belief that juveniles are developmentally different from adults and therefore should be rehabilitated and punished in a different manner. Despite early

aspirations to provide effective rehabilitation and treatment for youth, the juvenile justice system fell short by allowing its design to closely mirror the adult criminal correction system.<sup>1</sup>

Adolescence has always been recognized as a time of development and change. Advances in brain imagery such as Functional Magnetic Resonance Imagery (fMRI) show that adolescents are anatomically different from adults. These brain scans highlight the immature development of the prefrontal cortex in children and youth. The prefrontal cortex is the portion of the brain that is instrumental in decision making and moderating appropriate social behavior. It is not fully developed until one's early to mid twenties. Consequently, youth are less able to assess risks and long-term consequences, control impulsive behavior, and engage in moral reasoning. However, youth are more amenable to rehabilitation because their brain is still maturing. Thus, youth are more likely to "age out" of delinquency.<sup>2</sup>

**THE JUVENILE JUSTICE INITIATIVE**

As an extern, Reem researched alternatives to incarceration for juvenile delinquents in Ohio. She studied a number of examples of community based programs across the state of Ohio. Reem also examined the various rehabilitation and incarceration options offered through the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS). DYS is the juvenile correction system in Ohio. It operates eight correctional facilities and funds twelve Community Correctional Facilities (CCF). Community Correctional Facilities are run by counties and house lower-level juvenile delinquents who would have otherwise been committed to a DYS facility.

In 1993 DYS developed the

Before taking part in legislative meetings, Reem thought that legislators would be difficult to approach and engage. However, she quickly realized this was not the case. In meetings with State Representatives and their staff, the conversation began with conveying information about the need for, and benefits of, juveniles to be rehabilitated within the community. The members patiently listened and often agreed with the pressing need to focus on rehabilitation

and not merely punishment. The meetings ended with legislators offering help and thanking Voices for Ohio's Children and the Juvenile Justice Initiative for working on such an important issue.

These meetings showed Reem advocacy in action. She was able to go from the classroom to a professional office to the Ohio Capital building. She utilized and strengthened her research, writing and communication skills on an important issue for chil-

dren and families. In the legislative meetings she found her research, and the ability to frame it in a meaningful way, was a key ingredient in getting the attention of legislators and securing their support. She learned that in order to be an effective advocate, one has to be passionate and invested in their cause. Reem's time at Voices for Ohio's Children taught her how to raise her voice to bring about policy change to benefit children and youth.

Voices for Ohio's Children is a non-partisan collaborative of private, public, and non-profit sector organizations and individuals who advocate for public policy that improves the well-being of Ohio's children and their families. The work done at Voices results in public policy to ensure that Ohio's children are well-educated, healthy, and safe. The Juvenile Justice Initiative is dedicated to ensuring a more equitable juvenile justice system that combines evidence-based treatment, a shift away from institutionalization, increased judicial discretion, and increased family involvement. For more information about Voices for Ohio's Children visit [www.vfc-oh.org](http://www.vfc-oh.org).

Yvonne C. Hunnicutt, Director of Operations and Policy Associate at Voices for Ohio's Children, had this to say about working with our Mann Child Policy Extern, "I am very excited that Reem will be returning to Voices in the fall to continue her externship in the juvenile justice policy area. I am very proud of her research, depth and insight of the legislative and decision making process. Her skills and passion make leveraging policy and system changes for juveniles and their families more meaningful."

**Reem's experience** as a Mann Child Policy Extern with Voices for Ohio's Children enabled her to translate the skills she had acquired in the classroom into the office of a non-profit organization. She exercised the research skills that she had developed as a student to become knowledgeable on a critical issue impacting the lives of Ohio's most vulnerable population: its children. Her experience solidified her desire to pursue a career in law and ultimately run for public office. Reem is going to continue her work with Voices for Ohio's Children in the fall and looks forward to learning more about, and continuing to contribute to, the Juvenile Justice Initiative.

Reem had this to say about her experience: "This has been an extraordinary experience. I have been able to learn about the legislative process, and how legislation impacts people's lives. This externship has shown me that learning is ongoing and does not end when I leave the classroom. I am delighted to be able to continue my work with Voices in the fall, enabling another semester of experiential learning on an issue I am passionate about. It will also allow me the opportunity to continue to work with Yvonne C. Hunnicutt and Professor Molly Irwin, exceptional mentors who are invested in my experience and helping me realize my goals."

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Justice-Office of Justice Programs (2006), Juvenile Justice System Structure and Process. (<http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/nr2006/html/chp4.html>)  
<sup>2</sup> National Juvenile Justice Network (2008), *State of the Juvenile Justice System: A National Overview*. ([http://www.njjn.org/media/resources/public/resource\\_847.pdf](http://www.njjn.org/media/resources/public/resource_847.pdf))  
<sup>3</sup> Ohio Department of Youth Services (2009), *Reclaim Ohio*. (<http://www.dys.ohio.gov/dysweb/ReclaimOhio.aspx>)  
<sup>4</sup> University of Cincinnati Division of Criminal Justice (2005), *Reclaim Ohio: A Study of the Costs of Juvenile Justice*. (<http://www.dys.ohio.gov/dysweb/Reclaim/DYSCostBenefit121205.pdf>)  
<sup>5</sup> The University of Cincinnati Division of Criminal Justice (2005), *Reclaim Ohio: A Study of the Costs of Juvenile Justice*. (<http://www.dys.ohio.gov/dysweb/Reclaim/DYSRECLAIMreportAugust17.pdf>)

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