

BEYOND BARS

KEEPING YOUNG PEOPLE SAFE AT HOME AND OUT OF YOUTH PRISONS

We can all relate to a desire to feel a sense of belonging. Usually this conjures up ideas of being part of a community of people who share history, common interests, lineage, culture, homeland or neighborhood, among other things.

Young people also thrive on community. But for young people in conflict with the law, our response is too often the opposite. By incarcerating young people, we do things we know are harmful: expose them to marginalization and social isolation that can be traumatizing, make them feel (and be) unsafe, and separate them from their families and communities.

This report advocates for transforming our approach to young people in conflict with the law by growing community capacity and resources. This means creating and supporting programs and services designed to meet the needs of young people in the contexts of their homes and families. To realize the vision of moving from a facility-based juvenile justice system to a community-based system focused on developing and improving community supports for justice-involved youth and their families, we define continuum of care this way:

A continuum of care is an array of meaningful non-residential community-based programs, supports, resources and services specifically designed to meet the individual needs of young people and their families in their homes. Continuum of care cultivate the strengths of youth and families and provide them with what they might need at different stages of intensity in order to keep young people out of the juvenile justice system and confinement.

It could be argued that a community-based approach with a continuum of responses exists in many communities, but few are equipped to safely meet the complex and diverse needs of young people in the juvenile justice system and their families. The lack of full services in the community is often used as justification to incarcerate or place the young person in a youth prison or other out-of-home placement, even when it would be otherwise unnecessary. Many systems have reduced their use of out-of-home placements for young people but replaced them with surveillance-based alternatives that do little to meet a youth's needs or get to the root cause of why a young person ended up in the system in the first place. Communities need a diverse array of services to meet the equally diverse needs of each young person who needs help - some kids will need very little and others will need a lot.

This continuum of care should exist at all points in the system. Implementing a vast array of services and supports in the community can keep young people from being arrested, from being placed out of the home and can also hasten return from an out-of-home placement.

WHY WE NEED A CONTINUUM OF CARE TO CLOSE YOUTH PRISONS

Youth confinement has not worked for the vast majority of young people. According to a new report published by the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and the National Institutes of Justice, incarcerated youth are re-arrested within two to three years of release and there is mounting evidence that youth incarceration may increase the likelihood of recidivism.

Importantly, youth incarceration and other out-of-home placements have a disproportionate effect on youth of color in the juvenile justice system. According to a recent report by the W. Haywood Burns Institute, black youth are four times as likely as white youth to be placed out of the home; Latino youth are one and half to two times more likely to be placed out of the home and native American young people are 3.7 times more likely to spend time in an out of home placement as white youth. Taken together, race and gender also illustrate disparate treatment. For example, girls of color are twice as likely as white girls to be incarcerated.

DEVELOPING A CONTINUUM OF CARE

In any transformational change it's important to identify guiding principles that will help shepherd the change and maintain values that best serve the goal. Similarly, core components comprise the basic structure of what the change might look like and some key strategies help to tie it all together. Each of these will help systems provide adequate community supports and services to justice-involved youth and their families, and enable them to safely close their youth prisons.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

PROMOTE POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE/ DEVELOPMENT AND AN INCREASED SENSE OF RELATEDNESS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The Positive Youth Justice model focuses on helping youth learn and build attachments and belonging by focusing on connecting the youth to various domains including work, education, relationships, community, health, and creativity. Positive youth justice also promotes building on a young person's strengths and interests. A successful continuum of care for justice-involved youth would establish opportunities for youth to develop autonomy and competence through a focus on strengths and interests. It would also facilitate opportunities for young people to improve a sense of relatedness or belonging to their families and communities through being contributors to their communities and not just recipients of services.

DEFINE PUBLIC SAFETY AS MORE THAN LAW ENFORCEMENT

Traditionally, public safety has been about police and prisons and justice system carrots and sticks. Public safety is about much more than prisons and police. It's about all the things that characterize safe neighborhoods - access to good schools and jobs, and opportunities to learn, grow, develop and play in safe environments.

SHIFT FROM A SLOT-BASED SYSTEM TO A NEEDS-BASED SYSTEM

The current system asks "where do we place these kids?" but it should ask "what do our kids need?" and "how can we help them?" Far too often, young people - especially those with mental or behavioral health diagnoses or struggling with addiction - are sent to facilities simply because services to help them in the community do not exist. Rather than continue to rely on beds to meet these needs, systems and communities can work together to create these services in the community.

SERVICES MUST BE CULTURALLY COMPETENT AND NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED

While cultural competency applies to both rural and urban communities, culturally competent programs can also help address the racial disparities that plague the juvenile justice system. Resourcing the community to provide services and programs based on youth needs gives neighborhoods and systems the opportunity for true community engagement through hiring of "credible messengers," or street workers whose primary credential is their expertise in the community and the ability to engage young people.

- 1. PROMOTE POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE/ DEVELOPMENT AND AN INCREASED SENSE OF RELATEDNESS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**
- 2. DEFINE PUBLIC SAFETY AS MORE THAN LAW ENFORCEMENT**
- 3. SHIFT FROM A SLOT-BASED SYSTEM TO A NEEDS-BASED SYSTEM**
- 4. SERVICES MUST BE CULTURALLY COMPETENT AND NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED**
- 5. ENSURE THAT SERVICES, PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES ARE FAMILY-CENTERED**
- 6. INCLUDE YOUNG PEOPLE'S IDEAS WHEN CREATING THE CONTINUA**
- 7. IDENTIFY COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND ASSETS**

ENSURE THAT SERVICES, PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES ARE FAMILY-CENTERED

Families must be recognized as experts in their own children's lives. It isn't uncommon for families to be seen as a part of the problem, but children frequently gravitate back to their families and it is therefore difficult to help a young person in isolation from his or her family. Young people also respond well to their families getting their needs met.

INCLUDE YOUNG PEOPLE'S IDEAS WHEN CREATING THE CONTINUA

Young people have a lot to contribute to a system designed to meet their needs. The young people we met with suggested a system that provides them with jobs, but also access to information that could help them grow their future economic opportunity; family support programs, including respite, more prevention and community-based alternatives; and help alleviating crippling fines, small business loans and entrepreneurship classes and opportunities to give back.³⁰ Young people also can contribute to asset mapping to develop a system best designed to meet their diverse needs.

IDENTIFY COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND ASSETS

Mapping community assets is a meaningful exercise because it enables one to take stock of all the resources a community already has, even where certain communities are consistently characterized only by their challenges. Every community, no matter how depressed, has assets, some of which can be very diverse.

CORE COMPONENTS

Community providers are central to this continuum as they have the expertise in individualized service planning and the hiring of credible messengers and family advocates who can be the case managers, advocates, and lead workers necessary for success. As the needs of youth are revealed, a community's continuum of care could include any and all of these supports and services (and others identified by the community):



TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

All communities, especially those where young people are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, need a basic continuum of supports and services organized in such a way that youth and their families feel a sense of belonging and also get their needs met in different life domains. To effectively do this, a community-based continuum needs a mechanism to assess the needs and build a service plan for each young person that has a good chance of working.

Therefore, the first component would be to identify a community provider or several community providers who have the capacity (or could develop the capacity) to conduct assessments and develop individualized, unique and meaningful service plans for each youth and family. This process should be driven by youth needs, not program slots, and should include wraparound planning, credible messengers, family advocacy, a flex fund for extraordinary needs and focus on crisis and safety planning.

- WRAPAROUND PLANNING
- CREDIBLE MESSENGERS
- FAMILY ADVOCACY
- FLEXIBLE FUND
- CRISIS & SAFETY PLANNING

A Better Model for Serving Youth With Complex Needs

