

Positive Youth Justice Initiative: Phase II Implementation Highlights

Sierra Health Foundation launched the Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) in 2012 with the goal of supporting California counties to change the way they approach and work with justice-involved youth. Through an integrated model that invests in youth, treats trauma, provides wraparound service delivery, and strengthens local infrastructure, PYJI seeks to reduce barriers to youths' successful transition to adulthood, including structural biases that exacerbate the over-representation of youth of color in the juvenile justice system.

PYJI Phase II began in January 2016 with awards to two of the Phase I counties: San Joaquin and Solano. In addition to continuing organizational development strategies that shift systems toward a youth development approach, Phase II guides counties to scale reforms to all youth on probation, particularly those at highest risk of recidivism. Counties are also encouraged to deepen partnerships with youth-serving agencies including education, law enforcement, judicial officers, and community advocates. (For more information on the evolution of PYJI, visit <http://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/background>.)

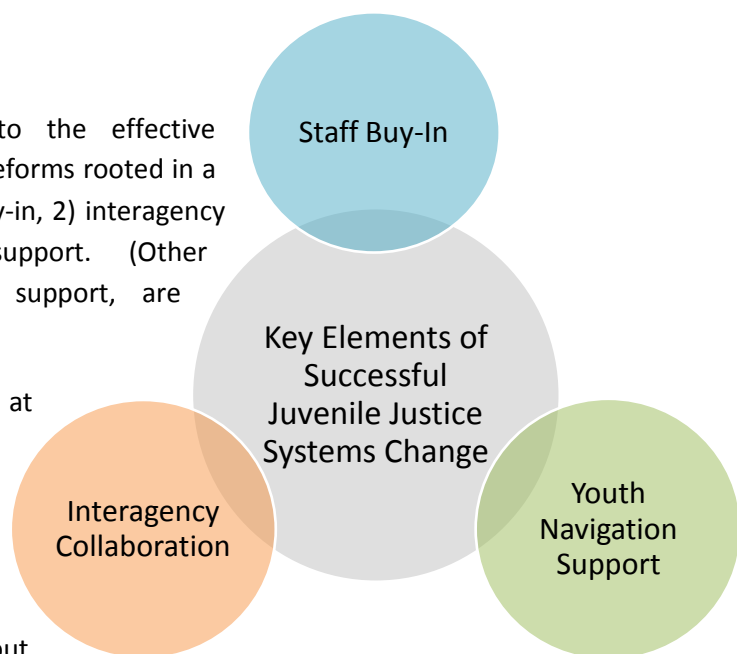
Purpose and Scope

This brief summarizes the key findings that emerged from a recent evaluation as PYJI counties moved forward in their efforts to achieve reforms that are both impactful and sustainable. Sierra Health Foundation contracted Resource Development Associates (RDA) to conduct the external evaluation of the implementation of systems change reforms through PYJI. The evaluation employed interviews, focus groups, and surveys with staff and youth in participating counties to explore the successes and challenges of implementing this far-reaching and ambitious initiative. This brief and the accompanying report do not address all aspects of PYJI implementation, focusing instead on the three major themes that emerged in data collection carried out in 2016. For more information and previous reports, visit: <http://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation>.

Implementation Lessons

The evaluation identified three keys to the effective implementation of juvenile justice system reforms rooted in a positive youth justice approach: 1) staff buy-in, 2) interagency collaboration, and 3) youth navigation support. (Other important factors, such as leadership support, are discussed in previous evaluation reports.)

1) Staff Buy-in. Support for PYJI from staff at all levels was essential for the successful implementation of systems changes. For agencies in which more staff supported a trauma-informed, positive youth development, and collaborative approach, and believed that PYJI would bring about



meaningful system changes, culture change occurred more quickly and employee engagement in the initiative was stronger. At the same time, when there was less consistent support for PYJI among staff at all levels, agencies were less likely to achieve non-punitive, positive youth development approaches to working with young people involved in the juvenile justice system.

2) Interagency Collaboration. Leadership across PYJI partner agencies identified collaboration as one of the key strengths of PYJI. In some cases, PYJI was the impetus for agencies to begin building relationships with other youth-serving organizations, which moved partners toward a new norm of working together. Increased coordination also supported consistent messaging and learning across agencies. When agency leadership and staff developed relationships outside of their agencies, they could more easily and quickly troubleshoot issues pertaining to youths' transitions between different systems. As a result of increased cross-agency communication, staff became more aware of each other's programs and therefore have been able to provide more targeted referrals to meet youths' and their families' needs. Youth also underscored the importance of communication between various youth-serving systems to ensure their success in completing their probation requirements.

3) Youth Navigation Support. In the PYJI evaluation, a trusted point person who could help youth navigate the juvenile justice and related systems and serve as both an advocate and a confidante was identified as crucial to supporting justice-involved youth. Youth described needing to have at least one adult in their lives who would encourage them and advocate for them across various youth serving systems. In one county, youth pointed to numerous examples of assistance from designated PYJI staff that included collaboration with school staff to ensure they had the appropriate classes needed for graduation and coordination with social service providers.

Below we highlight recommendations for making an impact in each of these three areas. While not the only elements required to transform juvenile justice and related systems into environments that support positive youth development, these three were identified as important opportunities for moving systems change forward. In Phase III, PYJI will be supporting community-based organizations in their organizing and advocacy for a healthy juvenile justice system.

To see the full report visit: <http://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation>.

What works to develop buy-in?

Why It Matters: Buy-in not only impacts staff's willingness to make changes in how they do their job; it also influences the sustainability of an initiative. Staff buy-in is particularly critical to successful juvenile justice systems change because the success of the justice system relies heavily on the interactions and relationships between staff and youth.

- 1. Develop an implementation plan.** Phasing in reforms can prevent staff from getting overwhelmed and also allow time for thoughtful planning. It is important, however, to ensure that there is constant progress and the initiative does not lose momentum. As part of the implementation plan, agency leadership should create a communication plan for how they will explain the initiative's benefits and the upcoming changes and their timeline to all staff.
- 2. Provide a variety of staff trainings to educate staff about the evidence base.** Train staff in the research supporting positive youth development and trauma-informed care and provide them tools to implement this new approach.
- 3. Involve midlevel and line staff early in the reform process and provide staff meaningful and regular opportunities for feedback.** Including staff from all levels early in the initiative will increase buy-in and facilitate implementation.
- 4. Celebrate successes.** Positive reinforcement is an effective tool to generate buy-in. Celebrating small successes can motivate staff and reinforce a positive agency culture.
- 5. Plan for staffing needs.** Staff will be more resistant to reforms if they view reforms as tasking them with additional responsibilities that they do not have the time or capacity to take on.
- 6. Identify and leverage staff champions.** Staff who embrace reforms will be particularly effective at messaging the benefit of the initiative to their coworkers.
- 7. Integrate initiative principles into job descriptions and hiring.** This will ensure new staff are on board with the initiative and promote its sustainability.
- 8. Expect that some staff may never buy into the initiative.** If some staff continue to resist changing their approach, consider shifting their responsibilities to minimize interactions with youth, if possible.
- 9. Model the way. PYJI strives to focus on youth development, rather than punitive sanctions.** In a similar vein, agency leadership should motivate staff through inspiration and information (e.g., communicating a shared vision, trainings) rather than intimidation or punitive measures.

What works to develop collaboration?

Why It Matters: Positive youth justice reforms seek to improve the overall health and well-being of justice-involved youth in order to support reduced negative contact with justice systems. This work cannot be completed by one agency alone; it relies upon a collaboration of youth-serving agencies that partner together to support youth and make meaningful and comprehensive reforms to practice and policy.

1. **Focus on common goals and highlight the mutual benefits of collaboration.** Recognizing that youth-serving agencies across the juvenile justice system, education system, and nonprofit sector all aim to benefit youth and prevent recidivism can provide a foundation for collaboration.
2. **Make concerted efforts to include all necessary partners at the planning table.** It can be difficult to engage partners if they were not part of the initiative's development and planning.
3. **Create opportunities for frequent contact across organizational hierarchies and different agencies.** Interagency training and meetings strengthen relationships and promote collaboration.
4. **Take the time to share information about how each agency operates.** Opportunities for deeper collaboration can arise when agencies communicate about their policies and practices.

What works to develop youth navigation support?

Why It Matters: In addition to personal support, justice-involved youth need someone to help them navigate the various public systems with which they and their families interact, including the juvenile justice, education, mental health, and child welfare systems. Ideally, this person has the knowledge and resources necessary to advocate for and support youth across systems. While this element may be challenging to scale due to the intensive time and financial resources needed, it is important to explore how jurisdictions can sustainably support youth and family navigators and advocates on staff as part of their efforts to promote system-wide culture change and collaboration.

1. **Dedicate resources to youth and family advocacy and support.** Even if reforms are made within youth-serving systems, youth and their families will need someone they trust to help them navigate each system and advocate for them. Providing meaningful advocacy and support requires time, funding, and space for individual meetings.
2. **Recognize that trust takes time to develop.** Matching youth with someone from a similar background with similar experiences can help build trust.
3. **Endeavor to build lasting relationships.** Advocates that will continue supporting youth and families after they complete probation or graduate from school can provide longer-term support.
4. **Empower navigators to effectively advocate for their clients.** Navigators should understand how other systems operate and should have access to staff and decision-makers across systems.