

# Positive Youth Justice Initiative Year 2 Evaluation Findings: Executive Summary

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The Positive Youth Justice Initiative is a Sierra Health Foundation initiative managed by the Center for Health Program Management, with additional funding from The California Endowment and The California Wellness Foundation.



## Executive Summary

### Positive Youth Justice Initiative: Background and Context

Sierra Health Foundation has long invested in the well-being of California’s youth, recognizing that supporting young people to lead healthy lives and reach their full potential is central to the foundation’s vision of long-term economic, social, and cultural health. Following years of on-the-ground experience in youth development, extensive research and preparation, and in the context of a favorable policy environment, the foundation launched the Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

PYJI aims to shift juvenile justice practice and policy by supporting California counties to design and implement system-level reforms to improve the health and well-being of crossover youth—youth who have been involved in the child welfare system and who are currently involved in the juvenile justice system. Through an approach that invests in youth, treats trauma, provides wraparound service delivery, and changes systems to strengthen local infrastructure and sustain the improvements, the initiative seeks to reduce barriers to crossover youths’ successful transition to adulthood, as well as to address structural biases that exacerbate the over-representation of youth of color in county juvenile justice systems across the state.

In 2012, one-year planning grants were awarded to six counties to support the development of comprehensive, data-informed PYJI innovation plans. In October 2013, four of these counties—Alameda, San Diego, San Joaquin, and Solano—were awarded two-year implementation grants. In each county, public agencies, community-based organizations (CBOs), and community leaders work together with the support of PYJI technical assistance providers to change how their local systems view, screen, and provide services to crossover youth and their families.

### Purpose and Scope of PYJI Evaluation

Sierra Health Foundation contracted with Resource Development Associates (RDA) to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation and early impact of PYJI in order to glean key lessons that the foundation can use to support counties in building systems that embrace positive youth justice. Recognizing that the literature on implementing and measuring systems change in the juvenile justice context is limited, the evaluation seeks not only to advise next steps in PYJI counties, but also to contribute to the juvenile justice field and inform future efforts in California and beyond.

The RDA evaluation team designed a **mixed-methods approach** to evaluate the implementation and initial impact of PYJI over a two-year time frame, with a focus on assessing the extent to which systems change how they work to support the youth under their jurisdictions. The evaluation team, in collaboration with Sierra Health Foundation, identified a series of data collection activities designed to produce a thorough understanding of implementation activities and strategies. These included: **key**

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**informant interviews** with PYJI leadership in each county; **focus groups with staff** from PYJI partner agencies and CBOs in each county; a **staff survey** that was disseminated to staff in PYJI partner agencies and CBOs; a **survey of youth and their caregivers**; and **focus groups with youth** in each county. The evaluation team also reviewed documentary data from each county and from the foundation, and met regularly with the Sierra Health Foundation PYJI team.

## Year 2 Evaluation Findings

The evaluation team synthesized data from counties' implementation plans, progress reports, key informant interviews, focus groups, and surveys to highlight cross-cutting themes of effective practices and key challenges during PYJI implementation.

### Year 2 Implementation Highlights

- All counties brought on **new partners** to support PYJI, particularly CBOs.
- All counties created **policies and procedures** including Graduated Sanctions and Rewards Matrices and made progress toward their implementation.
- All counties implemented **trauma-informed care training** with staff and partner agencies and some implemented trainings on positive youth development, gender-responsiveness, and racial and ethnic disparities.
- All counties observed that the juvenile justice system is approaching and/or interacting with youth in ways that are **increasingly aligned with PYJI elements**.

### Effective Practices in Year 2

- **Using multiple strategies helped counties prioritize and promote culture change.** By clearly communicating support from executive leadership, creating concrete opportunities for line staff involvement, and broadly implementing trauma-informed care training, counties informed and engaged line staff in the mission and goals of PYJI.
- **Maintaining strong and invested leadership from executive and/or upper management facilitated collaboration and buy-in.** In Year 2 all counties continued to leverage leadership-level collaboration to advance PYJI implementation, and some expressed that this collaboration had trickled down to improve inter-agency communication among staff working directly with youth. Executive level support also fostered buy-in across multiple agencies and levels of staff. Those counties where executive level leadership remained consistent in Year 2 noted the benefits of this stability.
- **Designating a PYJI coordinator assisted in advancing partner relationships, promoting buy-in and culture shift among line staff, and managing the initiative's activities.** As in Year 1, all counties noted limited staff time as a key challenge in implementing PYJI. In Year 2, most counties were able to hire and/or leverage existing staff resources to support PYJI. Most counties reported that having a "PYJI Champion," coupled with executive leadership, supported communication among staff and partner agencies.

- **Defining clear roles and opportunities for involvement helped engage PYJI partner agencies.** All counties made progress in bringing on new partners for PYJI collaboration. Counties in which partnering agencies had specified roles expressed feeling invested in PYJI and articulated their respective agency's direct impact in working with crossover youth.
- **Engaging youth, family, and community in PYJI activities promoted awareness, strengthened team-based decision making, and identified new areas for incorporating youth voice.** In Year 2, all counties also engaged youth and family involvement in team-based case planning to at least some degree, and all PYJI counties engaged the broader community through community engagement forums. In some counties youth also played an active and consistent role in implementation—for example, serving as mentors for PYJI youth, and sharing their feedback about the court process with Probation and/or Court leadership.

### Key Challenges in Year 2

- **Reliance on executive leadership to advance PYJI sometimes deterred initiative momentum.** Some PYJI partners expressed concern that the success of PYJI hinged on individual staff positions and personalities, and in some counties, unexpected staffing changes in prominent positions in some lead and partner agencies affected initiative progress by diminishing the involvement of leadership and communication with mid-level and line staff.
- **Confusion about roles and responsibilities limited the full participation of PYJI partners.** Some county PYJI partners conveyed confusion about roles and responsibilities for line staff in PYJI, which resulted in prioritizing their staff time for agency-specific work. Additionally, all counties expressed a desire for targeted training aligned with their agency's specific role in PYJI to mitigate confusion. Line staff from Child Welfare and Probation continued to observe challenges in coordination and priorities for their cases. Consequently, line staff suggested that counties identify representatives from each agency to work on strengthening communication and triaging crossover youth.
- **Emphasis on TIC training reduced counties' capacity to integrate and promote the other PYJI design elements.** While counties made progress in all PYJI design elements, the extent to which they emphasized and integrated each of the elements varied. When rolling out the initiative to staff, trauma-informed care—a national hot button issue with clear opportunities for professional development—was a natural starting point in counties' efforts to support culture change. Most counties approached the implementation of PYJI training consecutively, beginning with trauma-informed care in Year 1 and continuing this emphasis in Year 2. As a result, some counties noted that staff were less familiar with other PYJI elements such as positive youth development. In addition, most counties had not yet implemented new trainings or approaches to gender responsive services, and most also struggled to ensure crossover youth were being referred to accessible wraparound and other community-based services.
- **Departmental requirements for drafting, approving, and training staff in new policies and procedures resulted in lengthy processes to formalize changes in practices within and across systems.** Some counties explained that challenges have arisen in disseminating information about

policies and procedures to mid-level and line staff, and in ensuring that policies align across systems. In particular, dissemination of new policies and procedures for staff who are impacted by—but not directly involved in—PYJI remained a challenge.

- **Inconsistency in incorporating youth voices in programming and service delivery meant that youth still felt removed from the decision-making processes.** While counties made strides toward incorporating youth input in decision-making, most identified room for growth in the extent and consistency with which staff across and within systems engage youth. As in Year 1, some counties expressed challenges to gaining buy-in from families and identified mistrust of authority figures within these systems as a consistent barrier.
- **Longstanding barriers to data sharing continued to hinder agencies' ability to share useful information about youth across multiple systems.** All counties have made progress in their ability to collect data about crossover youth, and most now flag crossover youth in their data systems. Some counties are updating data sharing agreements with PYJI partner agencies and creating data-sharing memoranda of understanding with CBOs as well. At the same time, all counties continued to emphasize barriers to data sharing due to cross-platform information technology challenges and confidentiality concerns.