

Positive Youth Justice Initiative Phase I Implementation Evaluation 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.



Positive Youth Justice Initiative: Evaluation of Phase I Implementation

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 crossover youths' successful transition to adulthood, including structural biases that exacerbate the over-representation of youth of color in the juvenile justice system.

The two-year external evaluation of the implementation of systems change reforms in Phase I of PYJI—which included interviews, focus groups, and surveys with staff, youth, and caregivers in participating counties—explored the successes and challenges of the four counties (Alameda, San Diego, San Joaquin, and Solano) who have been implementing this far-reaching and ambitious initiative. This brief summarizes the key areas of progress and areas of challenge in PYJI implementation; facilitators of and hurdles to successful implementation; notable impacts of PYJI thus far; and areas for consideration as counties move forward in their efforts to achieve reforms that are both impactful and sustainable.

Areas of Notable Progress in PYJI Implementation

Systems change is a multi-year process that requires the commitment of many County and community-based stakeholders. Despite the challenges, each county has undertaken reforms to improve outcomes for crossover youth. The following are areas of notable progress in Phase I implementation.

- **Implementing trauma-informed care training.** When rolling out the initiative to staff, trauma-informed care was a common starting point in counties' efforts to support culture change. As a result, staff expressed greater knowledge of how youth are affected by trauma and how staff may experience vicarious trauma.
- **Bringing on new partners to support collaboration.** While counties had different approaches and timelines for engaging partners, all counties invited County and community-based partners to play an active role in decision-making about PYJI.
- **Creating or modifying policies and procedures to support PYJI.** All counties created new policies and procedures to support PYJI, such as incorporating trauma-informed care principles into contracts and hiring practices.
- **Developing and implementing tools to support data-driven decision making.** In an effort to appropriately match responses to crossover youth, all counties created Graduated Sanctions and Rewards Matrices, though they are still in the process of implementation.

Facilitators of Successful Implementation

- Maintaining strong and invested executive leadership
- Involving mid-level and line staff early on
- Designating a Systems Reform Coordinator to champion the reforms and manage implementation
- Defining clear roles and opportunities for youth-serving partner agencies
- Creating roles for youth in planning and implementation of reforms
- Integrating new reform efforts with existing work
- Leveraging expertise and resources

- **Implementing direct service programs for crossover youth.** In addition to implementing changes impacting systems as a whole, most counties also incorporated a direct service component for crossover youth. As a result, youth had access to new services.
- **Improving data systems to track crossover youth.** All counties improved their ability to track and monitor crossover youth and can now identify crossover youth in their respective data systems. Through modifications and improvements to their data systems, counties increased their ability to identify crossover youth and refer them to appropriate resources.

Challenges and Areas for Growth in PYJI Implementation

Counties experienced several common hurdles in accomplishing the system-level reforms set out by PYJI. In response, Sierra Health Foundation has designed Phase II of the initiative to respond to a number of these challenges.

- **Improving data sharing.** Data sharing was a challenge for all four counties due to barriers including confidentiality concerns and cross-platform information technology.
- **Consistently holding team decision making meetings.** While all counties made progress in developing mechanisms for team-based decision making meetings to support case planning, they were still working to establish regular team-based meetings on a broad scale. A majority of youth expressed that a parent or caregiver had attended meetings with their probation officer, but fewer reported that someone other than a parent or caregiver attended these meetings. Youth also said they primarily were only involved in team-based meetings at the beginning of their probation.
- **Implementing Positive Youth Development.** While all counties made progress toward encouraging participation from youth and caregivers in PYJI promotional activities in the community, incorporating youth involvement in planning for PYJI and in case planning remained challenging.
- **Bringing all necessary partners on board.** Despite considerable progress in bringing on new partners for PYJI, counties faced challenges achieving full involvement from other youth-serving institutions, particularly schools, the juvenile court, and other law enforcement agencies such as police.
- **Undertaking specific activities to reduce racial and ethnic disparities.** While some counties held trainings in implicit bias and formed task forces to address racial and ethnic disparities, most counties' policy and procedure modifications did not include specific mechanisms for confronting racial bias in sentencing and sanctions.

Challenges to Implementation

- Competing priorities and time constraints
- Confusion about roles and responsibilities of youth-serving partners
- Reliance on executive leadership to advance reforms
- Resistance to change among mid-level and line staff
- Bureaucratic processes to change policies and procedures
- Capacity to consistently hold team-based decision making meetings
- Barriers to cross-system data sharing

- **Integrating the four PYJI design elements.** While all counties made progress in implementing each of the PYJI design elements, thus far they have paid less attention to implementing the four elements in an integrated manner. Whether as a cause or a result of this, counties generally did not place equal emphasis on each of the four design elements. Trauma-informed care remained the most highly promoted element among line staff in the PYJI counties.
- **Supporting sustainable change.** All counties expressed that limited staff time was a key barrier to PYJI implementation. Most explained that for continued success PYJI required a significant increase of staff time and financial resources.

Impacts of Phase I Implementation

Counties reported **progress toward shifting the culture** of their agencies toward embracing trauma-informed care and positive youth development, especially within their respective Probation Departments. At the same time, counties noted there is still **more work to do in changing the culture across all youth-serving systems**, particularly the juvenile court and education systems.

Results from youth and caregiver surveys and youth focus groups indicate that while the implementation of PYJI has led to changes that could eventually impact youth, **it will take more time for youth and their families to feel the impacts in a consistent way.** A majority of youth and caregiver respondents reported that they believe their probation officers and teachers want things to go well for them, and most youth participating in focus groups said there was at least one staff person in their life who was supportive of their success. Yet in both years of the evaluation, most youth participating in focus groups reported that **the quality of their relationships with probation officers, schools, and service providers depend largely on individual staff people**, rather than on a system-wide approach.

Most youth participating in focus groups perceived that on the whole, judges, probation officers, and teachers do not value, listen to, or trust them. For example, youth in all counties shared that there were teachers who would **treat them differently because of their probation status** and sometimes threaten to call their probation officer to ensure compliance with homework or school participation. Some youth also described **instances where they felt racism or favoritism affected their sentencing** or how they were treated in juvenile hall. Youth reported that they do have **some input in their case planning**, although for the most part **judges, probation officers, or their parents decided what programs** they would participate in as part of their probation term. Youth who expressed the most positive experiences spoke about **staff who were on their side unconditionally**, got to know them, and pushed them to achieve their goals. They also found support from community-based groups for youth on probation, which offered safe and welcoming spaces where youth could receive **social support from others with similar experiences and backgrounds.**

Overall, the external evaluation found that PYJI has encouraged systems and staff to commit to new and ongoing reforms, while also recognizing that it takes time to overhaul traditional practices, shift culture among staff, and for youth to feel the results of those changes.

Moving Forward: Areas for Consideration

Achieving Impact

- **Bringing on additional partners.** To achieve comprehensive and upstream reforms, counties will need to consider how they can bring on all necessary partners and maintain involvement over time. According to the Phase II Concept Paper, strengthening partnerships, particularly with education, law enforcement, and advocacy organizations, will be an emphasis in the next phase.
- **Centering the system on positive youth development.** In order to achieve a system that centers on incorporating youth input, some counties may need to enhance their focus on staff development in PYD, as well as strengthen available community-based resources.
- **Moving reforms upstream.** Because PYJI continues to be an initiative that is designed primarily to improve how the juvenile justice system works with youth who are actively involved in the justice system, as the initiative enters the next phase it will be important for the Foundation and counties to define how these downstream reforms will align with the Foundation's Phase II goals of identifying upstream reforms involving the juvenile courts, police, and schools.

Sustainable Change Management

- **Role of direct services in a systems-change initiative.** Most counties instituted a direct service position or program to serve crossover youth. As counties move to scale up their PYJI plans to expand beyond crossover youth, as is expected in Phase II, the role and sustainability of a direct service approach will become increasingly important.
- **Initiative staffing structure.** Counties emphasized the challenges of ensuring they had the necessary staffing and financial resources to manage the initiative. As counties move forward, it will be important to consider if and how they will support a staff position dedicated to managing reform.
- **Balancing the role of executive leadership.** Executive leadership is crucial for reforms to succeed, yet counties will need to consider how they can balance the need for executive leadership support without relying so heavily on a particular leader that progress is lost if that leader leaves.
- **Integrating new reform efforts with other County work.** Counties mentioned the risk of "initiative fatigue" and noted that staff may feel hesitant to support new reform efforts. Moving forward, it will be useful for counties to explore opportunities to integrate new reform efforts with concurrent activities so the new reforms are seen as part of, rather than competing with, other work.
- **Guidance and oversight for the initiative's success.** As Phase II of PYJI begins, it will be important to consider and determine the role of the funding agency, the lead County agency, and partner agencies in overseeing and monitoring the successful implementation of reforms.
- **Role of external support and resources.** The evaluation of PYJI highlighted the benefit of dedicated support for planning and implementing reforms. It is therefore useful to consider the possibilities for leveraging internal and external resources to effectively implement systems changes.
- **Expectations for monitoring, outcome measurement, and use of evaluation.** Given the importance of data-driven decision making, particularly as the initiative continues and grows over time, it will be important to consider the Foundation's expectations around how counties monitor and measure their success and use evaluation for continuous improvement.