



INVESTING IN SYSTEMS CHANGE:

Year 1 Evaluation Findings from the Positive Youth Justice Initiative



Evaluation Methods

RDA collected data using a combination of site visits, key informant interviews with leadership in public agencies, as well as community-based organizations, staff focus groups and surveys, reviews of county data, and surveys of youth and their caregivers.

Sierra Health Foundation launched the Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) in 2012 in response to research on the poor outcomes for juvenile justice-involved youth, especially crossover youth — those who have been involved in both juvenile justice and child welfare systems — and evidence that applying positive youth development principles and other strategies can improve the likelihood of their success.¹ Through grants and technical support to four California counties — Alameda, San Diego, San Joaquin and Solano — PYJI aims to shift juvenile justice practice and policy to improve the health and well-being of crossover youth through system-level reforms that invest in youth, help treat previous trauma, provide wraparound service delivery and strengthen local infrastructure.

In 2013, Sierra Health Foundation contracted with Resource Development Associates (RDA) to carry out an evaluation of the implementation and early impact of PYJI. The Year 1 PYJI evaluation focused on documenting counties' progress in the early stages of implementing their PYJI plans. Data were collected from October 2013 to May 2014. The findings illuminate facilitators and challenges to system reform and point to focal areas for similar systems-change efforts in California and nationally.

KEY FINDINGS

Systems reforms require building on existing strengths, leadership support and commitment to collaboration with new partners.

- **Pre-existing strengths vary across jurisdictions.**

Each of the counties came to PYJI with an array of previous partnerships, systems change efforts and policy contexts — all of which serve as pre-implementation factors that shape their approach to and rollout of PYJI. Their plans for systems change reflect each county's history, infrastructure and readiness for change.

- **Leadership vision and support is necessary, but not sufficient, for systems reform.**

All counties identified strong support and a shared vision for PYJI from executive and/or upper management. At the same time, lead agencies in some counties have experienced greater challenges in developing their capacity for both organizational culture and structural change.

- **Developing infrastructure for systems reform requires collaboration among public agencies and between public and community-based organizations.**

Members of county and community-based organization (CBO) leadership noted that collaboration among many partner agencies was strong leading into PYJI. Most counties identified additional partners that they would like to involve in PYJI, including enhancing their engagement and collaboration with CBOs.

¹ 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.

Changing long-standing practices and philosophies is challenging, but counties are using or planning a variety of strategies to support these changes.

- **Training and technical assistance has been a priority of the counties.**

All counties have implemented staff training as part of PYJI. Trauma-informed care appeared to be the most common and highly prioritized training topic. At the same time, counties noted that identifying the right approach, trainer, timing and participants is a time-consuming process, and some members of leadership and line staff respondents raised concerns about sustaining the training over time.

- **Counties have begun to institutionalize reforms in agency policies and procedures.**

Most counties have incorporated trauma-informed care into at least some procedures and contracts, and expanded access to wraparound services. For example, some counties have established new assessment procedures, which provide a more complete picture of a youth's circumstances to inform decisions, including case planning and access to services as they enter the system.

- **Despite progress, further work is needed in data collection and sharing.**

All counties have made improvements in their ability to collect data on crossover youth. At the same time, the development of data systems, data-sharing protocols and procedures, and capacity for outcome measurement appears to be a formidable challenge for many counties and agencies.

- **Youth, family and community engagement needs to become a greater priority.**

Counties reported varying degrees of youth and family involvement in the PYJI planning process, with most noting room for growth in the extent to which they bring youth voices to the table in both PYJI planning and service delivery. One strategy — team-based decision making — will require the development of stronger partnerships with CBOs, youth and their families.

Most counties have incorporated trauma-informed care into at least some procedures and contracts, and expanded access to wrap-around services. Engaging youth and families in team-based decision-making has been more challenging.

Looking forward, systems and culture change will require ongoing leadership, time and a commitment to staff capacity development, among other elements.

County leaders expressed high levels of philosophical support for and buy-in to PYJI; however, limitations in staff capacity may mean that such support does not always translate to successful implementation. In addition, all counties noted limited staff time as a key challenge in implementing PYJI, particularly the time required for county staff to coordinate and manage PYJI. Leadership from some counties emphasized the benefit of the technical assistance provided through PYJI, while also voicing the need for additional assistance. Counties also have begun to consider how PYJI's focus on crossover youth will ultimately inform their systems work with the general justice-involved youth population.

Evaluation Next Steps

As the initiative progresses, the evaluation will continue to document counties' progress toward implementing their PYJI plans, further exploring the extent to which counties experience particular successes and challenges. In future years, the evaluation will also consider whether youth and caregivers have experienced any changes in the various systems and programs with which they interact as a result of their involvement in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

