

Positive Youth Justice Initiative Year 1 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 2012.¹

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 engaged 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, including 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. Considered a “baseline” phase, the current Year 1 evaluation aims to document the status of counties’ early-stage implementation, as well as to identify pre-implementation factors that may influence the progress of implementation.

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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 informant interviews with PYJI leadership in each county; focus groups with staff from PYJI partner agencies and CBOs in each county; a site visit with PYJI leadership in each county; a staff survey that was disseminated to staff in PYJI partner agencies and CBOs; and a survey of youth and their caregivers. 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 1 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 within key domains of systems change.

- **Leadership vision and support.** 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 cultural and structural change.
- **Line staff vision and support.** Both management and line staff observed that at this early stage of implementation there is less awareness of and support for PYJI among mid-level and line staff compared to the executive and upper management. Staff at all levels anticipated that at least some line staff would be apprehensive about or resistant to PYJI due to fears of added responsibilities and/or negative experiences with past initiatives.
- **Partnerships and collaboration.** Members of County and CBO leadership noted that collaboration among many partner agencies was strong leading into PYJI. In particular, counties with histories of collaboration through prior partnerships reported success in building on that foundation for PYJI. Most counties identified additional partners that they would like to involve in PYJI, and most public agency partners expressed a need to improve their engagement and collaboration with CBOs. Mid- and lower-level staff commonly observed challenges in coordination resulting from differences in priorities between Probation and Child Welfare and/or Probation and Behavioral Health staff, which they attributed to differences in the broader organizational culture of these agencies.
- **Policies and procedures.** In all counties both the PYJI lead agency and partner agencies have begun the process of creating new policies and procedures to support PYJI, with leadership describing PYJI elements that have been incorporated into new or revised departmental policies and procedures, and/or contracts with service providers. County leadership also noted that updating policies and procedures is a long process and that challenges can arise in ensuring policies align across systems.

- **Data collection, sharing, and use.** All counties have made improvements in their ability to collect data on crossover youth. At the same time, counties commonly cited challenges related to data capacity, data sharing, and use of data in decision-making.
- **Approach to services: PYD, TIC, wraparound, team-based decision making, and gender-responsive services.** To varying degrees, counties have implemented or explored many PYJI elements prior to the initiative. Most counties have incorporated TIC into at least some procedures and contracts and expanded access to wraparound services. While counties have taken steps to develop or expand team decision-making approaches, they also pointed out challenges with both the philosophical and practical shifts required to implement team decision making, highlighting a need for continued attention to adopting service delivery practices in line with PYJI.
- **Youth, family, and community engagement.** 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, both in PYJI planning and in service delivery. Counties were also at different stages in their efforts to engage the broader community, with some having held community engagement forums and others still in the planning process.
- **Staff training in PYJI elements.** All counties have moved forward in implementing staff training as part of PYJI, with TIC appearing 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.
- **Resources and sustainability.** With regard to staffing resources, all counties noted limited staff time as a key challenge in implementing PYJI. In terms of financial resources, some agencies reported drawing on funding sources such as Probation Department funds and contracts with community providers, although many were unclear about whether or how additional funding sources have been leveraged. Overall, agency leadership shared positive feedback about their experience working with Sierra Health Foundation. Leadership from some counties emphasized the benefit of the technical assistance provided, while also voicing the need for additional assistance. Some counties also raised concerns about having the necessary capacity and resources to sustain and expand system-level changes over the long term.

Moving Forward: Areas for Consideration

Placing counties' implementation successes and challenges in the context of the key components of effective systems change, the following stand out as key areas that Sierra Health Foundation should consider for further reflection and action as the initiative moves forward.

- **Moving from support to action.** For the most part, counties indicated high levels of PYJI support and engagement from executive and upper management, and in some cases from lower levels of staff as well. At the same time, counties noted challenges related to staff time, capacity, and

scheduling. Thus even when counties express philosophical support and buy-in, limitations in staff capacity may mean that such support does not always translate to successful implementation.

- **Importance of culture shift.** While data collection with line staff has been limited thus far, findings suggest that in many counties there will be significant challenges to changing philosophies and practices among line staff, particularly probation officers and child welfare line staff. Staff described deeply entrenched and troubling practices where agencies fight over where a youth belongs, with staff from each agency looking for ways to relieve themselves of responsibility for these youth. Focus groups with line staff and initial survey findings from youth and caregivers underscore that juvenile justice agencies in particular have significant work to do in moving from high-level philosophical support to positive juvenile probation practices on-the-ground.
- **Support for data capacity.** 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. This may be an area where counties require additional support from TA providers.
- **Integration of PYJI elements.** While all counties have had previous experience with various elements of PYJI, this may be the first time they have made efforts to integrate them. Because most counties have thus far focused on building their operational capacity, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the other elements have been implemented in an integrated manner, rather than in a more piecemeal fashion.
- **Initiative management and coordination.** The time required for County staff to coordinate and manage PYJI is significant. As such, it may be useful to consider the roles and responsibilities of the various initiative partners—grantees, TA providers, and Sierra Health Foundation—in the day-to-day management of PYJI planning and implementation.
- **Cross-county differences.** The four PYJI counties have designed implementation plans that are very different, and each of the counties themselves has unique characteristics. As the initiative progresses, it may be fruitful to explore whether counties experience particular successes and challenges based on the scope of their initiative—for example, whether they are undertaking a pilot project versus a county-wide project—as well as other county characteristics, such as size, geography, and demographic makeup.
- **Scope and scale of PYJI.** Counties have already begun to consider how PYJI's focus on the relatively narrow population of crossover youth will ultimately fit into their systems more generally. This speaks to the benefit of engaging counties in this discussion explicitly and early to ensure they are putting measures in place that will allow the initiative to be brought to scale.