

The background of the page is composed of several large, solid-colored rectangular blocks in blue and white, arranged in a non-uniform, stepped pattern. The blue blocks are of various sizes and are positioned to create a sense of depth and movement. The white blocks fill the remaining space, providing a high-contrast background for the text.

TAKING ON TRANSFORMATION

Chapter 5

BUILDING POLITICAL & PUBLIC WILL FOR CHANGE



SPECIAL THANKS

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**BUILDING POLITICAL
& PUBLIC WILL FOR CHANGE**



CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Overview of the Issue
- Markers for Self-Assessment
- Action Steps
- Checklist of Next Steps
- Chapter Resources

OBJECTIVE

[EXPLORE THIS CHAPTER ONLINE](#)

This chapter explains the importance of building political and public will to drive youth justice transformation and how to build political and public will across key stakeholder groups.

INTRODUCTION

Building political and public will is essential to moving forward the type of fundamental youth justice system transformation described in this Guide.

Many stakeholders have an interest in how the youth justice system operates, and many have power and influence over the direction it takes. Given the multiple agencies that make up the youth justice system, the various arms of government responsible for its policy and practice, and the many people—youth, families and communities—that are directly impacted by its work, a sincere and motivated youth justice leader simply cannot achieve the full will for system transformation on their own. Further, key goals of transformation, such as shrinking the system and investing in communities, themselves require that leaders expand beyond the silo of their agency to incorporate the voices and will of new partners, especially youth impacted by the system, their families and communities.

Given the many interests represented by the stakeholders to the youth justice system, building political and public will for transformation is a strategic process that requires planning and effort. Youth justice leaders may find themselves facing various starting points when they approach this process. They may have existing relationships with system stakeholders and youth, family and community leaders that form a platform for collaboration, or these may take time and attention to develop. They may find that some recognize the challenges inherent to the existing system, or they may



find that many require education on the realities of current practice and mandates for change. Public and political opinion may have caught up with the times and there may be media attention to the harms of incarceration, poor outcomes for youth and disproportionate effects on young people of color, or a leader may need to craft a strategic and compelling narrative to frame youth justice transformation in response to continued or renewed cries for policy that is “tough on crime.”

In most cases, whatever the starting point, a good deal of relationship building will be required, alongside a strong education campaign to bring stakeholders up to speed about the challenges with current youth justice practice and mandates for reform. Shaping an effective narrative will also require understanding and responding to the current levels of awareness and interests from various audiences and noting the points that will be most compelling locally to drive will for transformation—whether that is addressing ongoing racism and racial disparities, ending the harms of incarceration, reducing costs or reinvesting in communities.

This chapter is focused on an often behind-the-scenes and somewhat underappreciated part of a system leader’s role, which is to step outside of their specific job running a youth justice agency to consciously and deliberately build relationships with stakeholders across the youth justice system and beyond it, to advance their transformation goals. While much work will be done inside the agency to bring staff and other leaders forward in alignment with transformation (see chapter on *Changing Organizational Culture to Align with Vision and Values*), the bold goals associated with system transformation necessitate connection and relationship building with many stakeholders outside of the agency; being thoughtful about whose support and influence will be needed to advance reform; shaping a strategic narrative for change; communicating effectively with these different audiences; and being able to navigate the inevitable pushback and opposition, and persevere forward.

This chapter considers how leaders can build, sustain and harness the necessary political and public will to drive system transformation. It begins with an overview of the common challenges and need for building political and public will for transformation and then provides indicators for leaders to assess their progress with this work. The chapter then lays out action steps for building key relationships, organizing stakeholders, identifying targets of influence, developing a strategic communications plan, shaping a compelling narrative and deploying a media and communications strategy that reaches the various audiences necessary to move forward the goal of transformation. It concludes with a checklist of next steps and offers leaders additional resources to support this work.



OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

THE NEED TO BUILD POLITICAL & PUBLIC WILL TO DRIVE TRANSFORMATION


As youth crime and incarceration rates have declined steadily over the past few decades, these parallel trends have contributed to swelling support for systems change.¹ At the same time, recognition has grown regarding the ongoing harms of incarceration, including the physical, sexual and emotional abuse of young people; over-incarceration of young people, even for low level offenses; and significant racial and ethnic disparities. In concert, these phenomena—declining crime and incarceration, increasing support for reform and an urgent need to address ongoing harm—offer an opportunity for meaningful change within the youth justice system.

This rising awareness provides a window of opportunity for system leaders seeking to drive transformation. However, in order to capitalize on this opportunity, leaders must work to understand the local political landscape and gain the trust and buy-in of a variety of stakeholders inside and outside of the youth justice system and at the policy level, which may take significant time, strategy and coordination. Some stakeholders may already be bought into reform, while others will need significant education about the challenges inherent to the youth justice system and the need for change. Considerable work will need to go into understanding the political landscape—who the allies for transformation are, who does not oppose reform but may need to be persuaded (“persuadeables”) and who the opponents are—and crafting a strategic narrative that harnesses the will of the various audiences needed to move transformation forward.

Doing the work to build sustained public and political will for youth justice transformation goes beyond the typical job description of the youth justice leader. It is nevertheless essential to the success of any leader who is committed to fundamental youth justice transformation and therefore most leaders will want to get help from

communications and public affairs professionals, whether in-house or through contract (or a middle-ground of staff at a state-level who can be utilized for local agencies, or who work for a separate branch of the government from youth justice or corrections), to provide the expertise necessary to create a strategic communications plan and execute it.

Typically, the agencies of the youth justice system, and the system itself, have operated in siloes. Despite the inherent interdependency of the system and the effects that one agency's decisions have upon the others and youth pathways through the system overall, agencies such as law enforcement, the courts, probation and corrections have typically operated largely on their own, without talking or collaborating with one another or with partners from other youth-serving systems and the community.



POLITICAL WILL FOR CHANGE WILL NOT ONLY BE REQUIRED FROM THE OPERATIONAL AGENCIES OF THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM, BUT ALSO FROM POLICYMAKERS IN THE LEGISLATIVE, EXECUTIVE, AND JUDICIAL BRANCHES, WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR POLICY THAT CAN MAKE, BREAK, AND DEFINE THE IMPORTANT DETAILS OF TRANSFORMATION.

A transformation-minded youth justice leader entering this scene may therefore face the challenge of going against the grain of this history by moving outside the silo of their agency, building relationships with other agency leaders and staff, and shepherding them to do the same with others. Such a leader will need to spend a good deal of time on relationship building and on organizing stakeholders for collaboration. Given the nature of the youth justice system, the many agencies involved and the many affected by its work, fundamental transformation that implicates change across the system simply cannot be done in a silo. It requires all of the agencies responsible for youth justice to build will for transformation, communicate, work together, develop shared values and goals for a new youth justice system and organize for planning and implementation to



work toward these goals and values together. Political will for change will not only be required from the operational agencies of the youth justice system, but also from policymakers in the legislative, executive and judicial branches, who are responsible for policy that can make, break and define the important details of transformation.

As emphasized throughout this guide, youth justice transformation also requires breaking down the traditional siloes between the system and the young people, families and communities most impacted by it. Transformation requires leaders to recognize the critical stake that young people, families and communities have in youth justice transformation and the value of their experiences to informing transformation and, ultimately, taking on significant responsibility for a new, community-led approach. Centering the experiences and expertise of youth and families will be a critical element of the work to gain their buy-in, collaboration and participation in transformation. Their voices will also be critical to leading a narrative for change that will be compelling to many audiences. Leaders will want to include advocates and organizations of young people, families and communities in any task force or workgroup created to plan for and implement reforms. More detail on how to do that meaningfully can be found in the chapter on *Partnering with Young People and Their Families*. In some jurisdictions, these groups may have already organized networks and coalitions to advance change and leaders from inside the system should look to join their efforts rather than initiate new or separate planning processes.

As youth justice leaders build relationships across the system and with policy makers and community partners it will be an essential challenge to understand and navigate the local politics and identify the key levers of power that will need to be moved to achieve the political will for transformation. New leaders may need to spend considerable time doing this and getting to know the key players, the major influencers, the avid supporters of reform and the opponents who will need educating and persuading. There are likely to be key allies and opponents across all branches of government, across the system and in the community. This investigation will include becoming familiar with the climate for change among the public—looking at key messages being delivered in the media about youth crime and justice, and those that appear to gain traction and stick in the public dialogue and discourse. Are people focused on the harms of incarceration? Are they aware of racial injustices? Or are they focused on the need to be “tough on youth crime”? Understanding current messages and trusted sources will be key to utilizing the existing



crime”? Understanding current messages and trusted sources will be key to utilizing the existing infrastructure and shifting messaging as necessary to build support for transformation.

Leaders can access a variety of local resources to help them in this investigation process, including longstanding advocates and leaders from across the system who are familiar with the politics and players and can help translate, decipher, and navigate the scene. Leaders should spend time with advocacy groups and leaders of organizations representing and led by youth and family members to learn from their work. In many jurisdictions advocacy groups from outside the system have already been working long and hard to garner public support for system change. By developing common ground with these organizations leaders can both learn valuable lessons from their efforts and experiences and establish the kind of genuine, respectful relationships that serve as building blocks for coalition-building and growing public will.

As leaders get to know the political landscape and build relationships they will find various levels of understanding among stakeholders about the youth justice system and the mandate for change, and will learn where education will be needed to gain buy-in and support. Leaders are likely to find that many policymakers across branches of government do not have an accurate understanding of the youth justice system. They may never have reviewed data about the system, and may not know who it actually serves or how. They may not understand the harms of incarceration or what actually works to promote youth well-being and serve the goals of the youth justice system—that is, to reduce youth crime and promote youth success in the community. Leaders may find that a significant education campaign may be needed to help partners at the policy level and among key youth justice and youth serving agencies understand the challenges of the current system and the rationale and mandate for change. Public education is likely to be required to create a shared understanding that youth justice transformation is itself a public safety strategy and holds the best, most promising answers to helping young people to turn away from law breaking activity and live new lives of opportunity with community support.

Key allies will be helpful in educating new system leaders about the political landscape and where to move key levers to drive transformation, so these



CASE STUDIES

GRASS ROOTS CAMPAIGNS THAT EXEMPLIFY PREEXISTING EFFORTS RIPE FOR COLLABORATION²

A number of successful grassroots campaigns demonstrate how steady work to build political and public will can push transformation efforts forward. Some of these efforts are described briefly here, with additional resources cited in the Resource List at the end of this chapter.



California

In the late 1990s a group of advocates and attorneys in California came together to improve the poor conditions incarcerated children were experiencing in facilities. Through hard work and collaboration they realized that the institutional model being used was inherently harmful. Working alongside young people who had lived in the California Youth Authority prisons, this small group of advocates and attorneys worked for decades to dramatically reduce the number of children in these state-level facilities.



Mississippi

After a report was released by the DOJ in 2002 detailing the concerning conditions in Mississippi's youth prisons, community organizers and a wide range of advocates joined forces to advocate for legislation that would transform the juvenile justice system. As a result, they were able to reduce the number of children in custody and close multiple detention centers, a youth prison and a prison that was specifically for children tried as adults.



Texas

Amid a sexual abuse scandal in the Texas juvenile justice system, advocates were able to shift the narrative from focusing solely on abusive prisons to focusing on reducing the number of facilities and incarcerated children. Through the collaboration of advocates, youth and their families and lawmakers, the state passed legislation which overhauled the juvenile justice system and reduced the number of incarcerated children. ■

system and community stakeholders will be just as essential to building political and public will itself. Judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, chief probation officers, correctional administrators and other leaders of the youth justice system are uniquely positioned to make a case to the public for a more equitable and effective approach to youth justice. Their deep understanding of system challenges, potential capacity to build bridges across diverse stakeholder groups and awareness of the political landscape provide these leaders with a unique vantage point that can inform local discussion about youth justice and the reforms needed to create a more effective and fair system. Deeply important as well will be the real life stories of young people who have been impacted by the system—what happened to them, what harms occurred and what the effects were on their lives. These stories can be juxtaposed with powerful stories of opportunity presented by community-based alternatives, locally as well as in other jurisdictions.

A principal goal and challenge after relationship building, investigating the political landscape, and understanding what stakeholders need to be educated on will be to create a coherent narrative or set of narratives about the system and the need for transformation that will resonate with different key audiences. As leaders work to understand the political landscape, they are likely to find that different messages speak to different audiences. They may find that some messages are more pertinent and persuasive in their jurisdiction and in the current political climate than others. Media and the public may be focused on the harms of incarceration, or on its costs.

The public and certain policymakers may find the stories of young people, the harms and injustices of incarceration experienced and the impact on their lives most compelling. Surveying the landscape and crafting a narrative about the system and mandate for change that will drive widespread political and public will may require assistance from a communications team or a consultant with expertise crafting messages and/or leading campaigns. For a system leader committed to transformation this is a worthwhile and necessary investment of time and funds.

Last, leaders will need to be prepared for expected opposition and the challenges that will inevitably come as the work of transformation progresses. Every jurisdiction that has done the work of transformation has faced some kind of opposition, and a familiar set of political questions that can help other

jurisdictions prepare for their own path forward. Each jurisdiction has also experienced some crisis point or points where a critical incident occurs with a young person in the community or doubt surfaces around one program or another that has been contracted to replace incarceration. Political winds are fickle, and noteworthy incidents can quickly turn a less educated public opinion toward mandates for policy that is “tough on crime” without understanding the implications of that narrative for youth, families and communities affected by the system, and youth justice policy and practice that actually serves the goals of safety and well-being that are shared by all. Well-planned communications can be prepared for these scenarios and leaders should understand that interim hiccups and setbacks are part of the long-term path of successful youth justice transformation. It will serve leaders to work with an experienced communications team and others who have navigated opposition and political crises to build an expectation for and response to these moments into the narrative for change.

In the indicators, action steps and checklist below we consider how leaders can build, sustain and harness the public will necessary to drive meaningful transformation of the youth justice system. The action steps are designed to elevate principles that can support this process across jurisdictions as well as include local distinctions that leaders may encounter as they proceed.





MARKERS FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT

INDICATORS OF PROGRESS IN BUILDING POLITICAL & PUBLIC WILL

A number of indicators can paint a picture of the climate for transformation, specifically as it pertains to existing political and public will for the transformation effort and to what extent that will has already been built. These indicators reveal where work has been done and where more work needs to be done to garner support and maintain commitment to transformation. System leaders can use these indicators to understand where they are in the process of building political and public will for transformation, and where to focus new or ongoing efforts.

Indicators that progress has been made in building political and public will:

-  System leaders have established and articulated a vision for change that is clear and reflects a commitment to youth voice and racial equity; a variety of stakeholders have participated in building a vision for transformation, including youth and families.
-  System leaders have been transparent about the failures of the system and harms of youth incarceration and have invited stakeholders to visit facilities and review data.
-  System leaders have built relationships with key stakeholders, including system impacted young people, their families and leaders from the communities most affected by the justice system, as well as leaders from across the youth justice system, and policymaking representatives from the executive, legislative and judicial branches.
-  System leaders have joined or collaborated with existing coalitions, or created a task force or workgroup that includes members of all the key stakeholder groups.



System leaders have connected with and learned the views of key political leaders and policymakers with oversight over the policies, laws and regulations that inform and guide the youth justice system and, together with key system, youth, family and community partners, have begun the work to educate these stakeholders about the current system and mandates for change.



System leaders understand the narratives and information that are being communicated to the public about the youth justice system and what narratives are found to be most compelling



System leaders have developed a comprehensive communications plan, employing professional communications staff or contractors to both create and execute the plan, which amplifies the voices of the young people and communities impacted by the system and ensures that complex narratives are told about how and why youth come in contact with the system

- System leaders have worked with key system and community partners to develop a compelling narrative, or set of narratives, to reach key stakeholder audiences and build political and public will for transformation; the narrative centers youth well-being and racial justice and equity
- System leaders have worked with stakeholder partners to put out messages—including accurate and complete data and narrative accounts from youth and families—about the current state of the youth justice system, including the role of adolescent development in structuring successful responses to youth behaviors, the inherent harms and failures of incarceration and the proven benefits of community-based and family-centered support for young people
- Leaders have proactively established a plan for addressing pushback and opposition to the transformation process, including addressing critical incidents that come up and could otherwise threaten positive political and public will developed for transformation.

Indicators that more action is needed to build political and public will for change:

-  Leaders have no clearly articulated vision for youth justice transformation and have not worked with key system, youth, family and community partners to build a shared vision or develop common values and goals to drive youth justice transformation.
-  System leaders have not been transparent or public about the failures of the system and harms of youth incarceration.
-  Leaders have not built relationships with the people most impacted by the system, and have not included them in the transformation process; leaders continue largely to operate in a silo and have not developed relationships with other system stakeholders or policy-makers.
-  Leaders have not established a regular forum for collaboration with stakeholders inside and outside the youth justice system through a workgroup or task force, or those groups are not inclusive of the entire array of stakeholders.
-  Leaders have not engaged with local political leaders or policymakers to understand their position or current level of understanding about youth justice practice and policy; leaders have not engaged policymakers in the transformation process and have not taken focused action to educate policymakers about the current system or the rationale for transformation.
-  System leaders have not established a communications plan, with dedicated professionals to help craft and implement it, or any communications plan established does not reflect an accurate understanding of current narratives, potential misinformation being publicized or views of the general public.
-  System leaders have not taken action to understand the public narrative about youth justice, incarceration or youth crime, or what messages and vehicles of delivery are prominent in the media related to these topics.

- ✓ System leaders have not worked to develop a coherent and compelling narrative or set of narratives to reach stakeholders and build political and public will for transformation.
- ✓ Racial justice and equity are not a core value in the narrative being communicated and in the stakeholders who are engaged and voices amplified in messaging; system leaders have no established mechanism to gather and incorporate feedback and input from impacted youth and families.
- ✓ System leaders are unprepared to address criticism of or opposition to transformation or to contextualize any critical incidents that arise as transformation work begins.



ACTION STEPS

The below action steps walk leaders through key tasks and phases of building political and public will:

Wherever leaders find themselves in the process of building political and public will for youth justice transformation in their jurisdiction, there are a number of clear steps to take to build relationships, organize stakeholders, educate key influencers and craft and deliver an effective narrative for transformation.

1. Build Relationships with Key Stakeholders

2. Form or Join a Task Force Focused on Transformation

3. Develop a Communications Plan

4. Identify & Educate Targets of Influence

5. Build a Compelling Narrative

6. Deploy Your Narrative

ACTION STEP 1

Build relationships with key stakeholders.

An ambitious effort to transform the youth justice system depends on broad support from multiple stakeholders and constituents. While some support for transformation may already exist in the jurisdiction, and support may come naturally from some stakeholder groups, building widespread support requires a well-planned and executed campaign to: 1) mobilize groups already aligned with the vision (supporters); 2) enlist those who are amenable to the vision despite having some concerns (“persuadables”); and 3) anticipate and respond to groups that may oppose the proposed reforms (committed opponents).

The following steps guide leaders in identifying and building relationships with all key stakeholders who are important to the transformation effort:



Develop a list of the key groups and actors that must be engaged to build public and political will for transformation. These include:

- ✓ Key system actors from across the youth justice system who will be central to transformation. For example, correctional staff, probation and parole officers, judges, prosecutors, defense counsel, law enforcement and service providers under contract with various state agencies;
- ✓ Policymakers, meaning state and local elected and appointed officials who control many policy, regulatory and budgetary decisions that define how the youth justice system functions;
- ✓ Youth and families who have been impacted directly by the system whose experiences give unique understanding about how systems should be transformed and unmatched credibility in advocating for change;
- ✓ Advocates, who are knowledgeable about how the system has been operating and often have been pressing for reform for years, including faith-based groups and victims’ advocates, among other youth justice advocacy organizations;



- ✓ Community-based organizations and service providers who will be asked to play new roles in a transformed approach to youth justice and who will have important experiences and insights on how best to support young people and their families.

Other “unlikely” allies who may have a vested interest in youth justice and are worth the time and effort of system leaders to engage and build relationships include:

- Senior leadership and frontline workers in other child- and family-serving systems, such as child welfare, child mental health and education. Young people who become involved with the youth justice system often have prior or ongoing involvement with these other systems and these leaders can be powerful allies;
- Public health, mental health and other medical professionals who can help re-contextualize youthful behavioral problems within a psychosocial adolescent development framework;
- Academics and other researchers who can help identify evidence-based interventions that get better results for young people and communities;
- Residents of communities with high numbers of young people who are impacted by the youth justice system. Residents of these communities are directly affected by the youth justice system, whether they have been impacted by youth crime or their families have been impacted by the justice system;
- Labor unions and their members, including people employed directly by the government or justice system, as well as those who don’t work within the system but are part of impacted communities;
- Other community stakeholders like business owners and educators.





Building on existing relationships, connect with each of these stakeholders early in the reform process. Before meeting as an organized group (as explored in the next action step), it can be very helpful for relationship building and candid conversation to meet and engage together one-on-one with each of these stakeholders, or with a small team from their agency, as desired. The goal of such conversations will be to get to know one another, come to better understand their perspective on the system and the potential path forward for transformation, identify collective goals and opportunities for collaboration and strengthen partnerships. These groups all have ideas and insights that should be considered as the vision and strategy around the reform effort take shape. By exploring their views on challenges and opportunities within the youth justice system leaders can create space for open dialogue and debate on how to improve system outcomes and introduce a framework for transformation. Engaging them in the process early on lets stakeholders know that leaders care about their views and their participation in the process and increases the likelihood that they will become willing and supportive partners and collaborators in the effort, ensuring some degree of support at the outset and creating the potential for a diverse array of ambassadors for reform. This is a critical first step in developing relationships that will be crucial throughout the transformation effort.

Regarding young people, families and communities specifically, much more information related to building relationships is covered in detail in the chapters on *Partnering with Youth and Their Families and Shifting Roles, Responsibilities, and Resources to Communities*. Most often, youth, families and communities have been neglected by local leaders as an audience and partner for reform and many have experienced great harm due to the system. It will likely take concerted and deliberate efforts to build trust with these groups before meaningful collaboration can occur. We recommend that leaders consult the above chapters for more information on building relationships with these important stakeholder groups before beginning their efforts.

Continue to build relationships with different groups in a variety of ways:

- ✓ Invite state and local officials to meetings that include tours of correctional facilities (being clear about the purpose of these visits within the plan for transformation) and provide recurring updates on reform with briefing memoranda or phone calls. Invitees would be officials with some level of responsibility for the facilities and who in many instances have never been in them or any other prison or facility;
- ✓ Work with advocates to understand their current reform efforts and discuss potential shared goals;
- ✓ Engage directly impacted young people and their families around their experiences in the youth justice system, perspectives on reform efforts and goals for system transformation. Again, leaders are advised to read the chapter on *Partnering with Youth and Their Families* for strategies for effective and considerate collaboration with these groups;
- ✓ Visit and talk with community-based organizations to learn about their work and approaches in supporting young people and identify how they might help lead in transforming current approaches to youth justice;
- ✓ Attend local community meetings and conversations among stakeholders and get youth justice on the agendas of those meetings where it is not already;
- ✓ Reach out to neighborhood or professional associations that are engaged in public safety and youth justice efforts.

For all of these groups, youth justice leaders should invest time in continuing to strengthen relationships through strategic follow-up, including recurring meetings, updates and invitations to events. Leaders should look for opportunities early and often to collaborate, including on research, communications or events that can build political will and advance system transformation.



ACTION STEP 2

Form or join a workgroup or task force focused on youth justice transformation.

Youth justice reform efforts across the country have often used task forces or workgroups as a vehicle to bring together key stakeholders to plan, design and/or oversee implementation of transformation processes. Examples include groups appointed by the executive, judicial and/or legislative branches, groups formed by activists and advocates, special subcommittees within State Advisory Groups and other ad hoc or formally established groups.

These groups bring together key decision-makers and other essential stakeholders, including young people, their families and communities, help build a shared understanding of the operations and results of current youth justice approaches, and work to develop a collective vision for transformation, set of goals and related list of reforms. Many of the action steps discussed below can guide the work of these planning and oversight groups, should their focus turn to external communications and building public buy-in.

As discussed above, in some jurisdictions leaders will find that local advocacy and community organizations, including youth and families, have already been working in organized coalitions and groups to address the need for fundamental change in the youth justice system. In these places system leaders should explore whether they might either join and expand on these groups or coordinate with them in the formation of the task force or workgroup. This type of mapping can help avoid reinventing the wheel and also foster trust and respect among those who are already doing this work. It can also reinforce the notion that community members play a major role in future system transformation planning. Whether to create a new workgroup or task force for transformation or join

EXAMPLES OF WORKGROUPS OR TASKFORCES

Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force

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Kansas United for Youth Justice

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Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission

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Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment & Reinvestment Task Force

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an existing effort is discussed at length in the chapter on *Developing a Shared Vision for Transformation*. That chapter also discusses other key considerations in developing a workgroup for transformation. Should leaders have already convened such a workgroup or task force after reading that chapter, that group may continue to serve many purposes over the course of transformation, utilizing various chapters of this Guide, including here, *Building Political and Public Will for Change*.

Whatever the specific structure, youth justice leaders should establish a means for regular communication and problem-solving with the group of stakeholders relevant to transformation. State Advisory Groups established by the federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act exemplify this type of regular opportunity for problem-solving. Regardless of the specific forum or structure, leaders from the judiciary, law enforcement, probation, prosecutors, defense attorneys and correctional systems should meet regularly, not only with each other but also with leaders from groups representing young people, their families and their communities.

ACTION STEP 3

Develop a strategic communications plan for deploying the narrative.

If staff with communications expertise are not already employed and available to help consider hiring or contracting with communications professionals to help create and implement a strategic communications plan. This plan should build on relationships and work done to center community and the people most impacted by the justice system and it should guide the work of controlling the narrative around youth justice and communicating a plan for transformation both publicly and to key stakeholders and decision-makers. The elements of the plan should include:



- The landscape of the available media, reporters and outlets that cover youth justice and related issues;



- ✓ Identification of key audiences, including their interests and strategies for enlisting their support;
- ✓ Credible spokespeople who can be enlisted to help carry the messages, supported by media training;
- ✓ Tools and products that summarize key messages, including talking points, illustrative examples of successful reform, one-page summaries, brief reports, charts and graphs summarizing key data, stories about young people or short videos;
- ✓ A plan for crisis communications responding to negative stories or push-back;
- ✓ Development of a full social media strategy including use of listservs, regular communication via email and social media platforms;
- ✓ Meetings with editorial boards of key news outlets to describe plans and respond to questions and concerns;
- ✓ Plans for hosting and/or speaking at conferences and other events that attract key audiences;
- ✓ A network of relationships with media personnel, including journalists.

ACTION STEP 4

Identify and educate critical targets of influence.

Many people in significant positions of power relative to the youth justice system, including members of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government, may not be deeply familiar with how the system operates, the harms of current approaches, the mandates for change and the significant potential benefits of transformation. Yet transforming a



youth justice system, including ending reliance on youth prisons, requires the support of all of these important players. Gaining that support requires developing both a thorough understanding of these stakeholders' current beliefs about youth crime and the youth justice system and a clear strategy for engaging and educating each of them to cultivate opportunities to increase understanding and openness to reforms.

Transforming a state or county's approach to youth justice will likely require the engagement and education of many critical influential targets—people in positions of power who may require relationship building and education to become supporters and potentially vocal allies for transformation.



Legislators

Legislators at the state and county level pass the laws and control the budgets that define and maintain the system on the most fundamental level. While sometimes there are one or more local legislators who have developed familiarity with the youth justice system as champions of reform, in general legislators are likely to be largely unfamiliar with how the youth justice system operates on a day-to-day basis, what its outcomes are for youth and communities and the harms that young people, families and communities are experiencing as a result of the system, including significant racial and ethnic disparities. Legislators will often require a good amount of education to understand how the system works, how various legislative proposals may affect the system, youth, families and communities and how to craft legislative proposals that are informed by best practices, research and the experiences of young people and their families. Leaders will also want to be aware of which legislators may be vocal opponents of transformation, possibly due to nothing more than a “hard” stance on youth crime, and target this group especially for relationship building and education.



Executive Branch Officials

Executive branch officials set policies and procedures as well as determine day-to-day operational decisions that have far-reaching impacts on how the system performs. Like the legislative branch, this group is likely to present a range in their

understanding of current youth justice system policy and practice with many highly unfamiliar with the detailed, day-to-day operations of the system or its needs for reform. Again, there may be one or two champions of youth justice who may have a better understanding than others. Some executive branch staff may have been with the agency for many years and may have outdated understandings of what makes good youth justice policy and practice. Education will likely be required to bring these staff up to speed with current best practices, lessons of research and the goals and values of youth justice transformation that will better serve youth, families and communities. Often staff at the level of the mayor's or governor's office are likely to require a good amount of education about youth justice to cultivate awareness and support for transformation. There may be one or two criminal justice staff in these offices with experience who can be allies in this effort—or opponents, depending on local politics.



The Judiciary

The judiciary also sets policies and procedures and makes case level decisions that determine which young people enter the system, at what level of intervention and when they exit. With the judiciary involved in making active decisions about the youth justice system on a day-to-day basis they are often the most educated and knowledgeable of the three branches, regarding the youth justice system. Still, this group will present with varying levels of awareness, current information about the system and biases from past experiences. Leaders should assess the current understanding of judicial leaders, make note of anyone who stands out as an opponent and make an effort to build relationships with and educate this group. Other critical targets for influence in the courts include the prosecutor's office—the attorney general, state's attorney, district attorney—and the public defender's office.

After reviewing the gaps in knowledge that exist among these key decision-makers, provide accurate and actionable data, detailed personal accounts from youth impacted by the system and other research evidence that builds policymakers' understanding of the gaps between their beliefs and goals for the system and what is actually happening on the ground. For example, youth justice leaders can:



Provide regular dashboard reports and briefings to key policymakers. These reports and briefings should be concise, clear and easy to understand and remember. This presentation of information will encourage their use rather than relying on thick, indigestible binders of detailed data and charts. Asking young people and families to participate in briefings can bring an important human dimension that makes stories and data about the youth justice system real, tangible and especially compelling.



Issue periodic press releases and meet regularly with reporters to share highlights of the data and evidence relevant to improving youth justice. This information should include research and data from other related systems outside of justice and from other places.



Work with partners to convene periodic “state of the system” conferences that include updates on system dynamics and performance as well as presentations and discussions on best practices and research on the most effective interventions. Youth, family and community partners should be central to these presentations.

Critical to the work to inform policymakers will be working with youth, family and community partners and organizations representing these groups to ensure that youth voices are central in messages to inform policymakers and other influential leaders about the current system, its harms and the

mandate for change. Leaders should be sure that they have open and ongoing communications with youth, family and community groups and regular forums to collect stories that provide direct insight into current system challenges and potential solutions, and narrative context to data presented. Voices from those most impacted by the youth justice system are critical in underscoring the problems with the current system and the great potential that lies in taking another path.

ACTION STEP 5

Build a Compelling Narrative About Your Jurisdiction, Calling for Transformation

Public interest in reforming any policy arena is largely shaped by the dominant narratives and stories people tell each other to make sense of complicated issues. A successful media and communications strategy will be informed by these preexisting cultural narratives and the values assigned to them.

To develop a compelling narrative about the youth justice system that can drive public and political will for transformation, youth justice leaders and others working toward change should first assess the current landscape of political and public will for youth justice reform by examining what sources of information shape local dialogue and consciousness around the youth justice system and what the current narratives are circulating about the system and young people involved with it. Leaders should then shape the story that will be most impactful for its audiences relevant to driving transformation.



First, examine the current narrative about the youth justice system and young people involved with the system. What are the messages informing the understanding of critical decision makers, including the governor's office, legislators, county administrators and supervisors, or the mayor's office? Is this information accurate? Are their data sources politicized? To analyze the information shaping local dialogue and public opinion leaders might examine the following:





Local news reports on crime, safety and public financing. *How does the local media report on public safety, or recent instances of crime, delinquency and youth behavior generally?*



Policy or research reports on the youth justice system. *Have there been any research or policy reports on racial disparities within the youth justice system or other public arenas? Anything related to the harms of incarceration?*



Public officials' and local leaders' public statements around public safety concerns and approaches. *How do local leaders frame current approaches to public safety and how does public financing reflect these approaches?*



Advocacy campaigns around youth justice. *Whose voices are prominent in local advocacy campaigns and what are their proposals?*



Trends in social media commentary and debate. *What is the popular public discussion locally about youth justice and youth involved with crime?*

These questions can help to shed light on public priorities and how they are formed. For instance, if local news reports describe recent studies on racially disparate outcomes within spheres of youth justice, education, etc., this might provide an important avenue to cultivate dialogue around reform efforts to enhance equity. On the other hand, if news reports routinely highlight instances of violent crime perpetrated by Black youth and fail to report crimes by white youth, leaders will need to work to provide a counter framing. Each of these questions can provide insight into potential allies for reform and those who may be more hesitant about supporting system transformation. These considerations, then, can help to frame public education and communications strategies.

2

Having gauged the state of local dialogue and understanding about the youth justice system, consider what information will help to develop the public understanding and will be necessary to drive change and shape a compelling narrative for change that responds to key public interests and addresses gaps in understanding. Effective messaging will convey the facts about who is in the system and why, current failures and harms of youth incarceration, including racial and ethnic disparities, and the benefits of community-centered, family-focused alternatives. Pay special attention to how the problem is shared, what is emphasized (i.e., the harms of incarceration, racial and ethnic disparities, cost, etc.) and what the solutions are and why (i.e., how to involve youth, families, and communities and where to center reinvestment).

3

To develop broader public understanding and political will around the need for system transformation collect and elevate data (quantitative, qualitative and individual accounts) on the two core purposes of the youth justice system: to reduce the odds that young people will commit harmful or illegal acts in the future; and to increase the odds that they will be on a path to successful, fulfilling lives.⁵

- ✓ Provide both data and anecdotes about the ways youth prisons actually contribute to recidivism and more serious harmful behavior
- ✓ Provide both data and anecdotes illustrating the negative short- and long-term impact of youth prisons on development and later life outcomes for young people
- ✓ Provide both data and anecdotes illustrating positive outcomes for community-based, family-focused, youth-centered services, supports, and opportunities
- ✓ Share information about the number and demographics of youth detained and incarcerated, including egregious racial and ethnic disparities in treatment of young people
- ✓ Publish information about the fiscal costs of youth prisons, especially compared with investments in education, youth jobs, and community-based programming.⁶

CREATING A COMPELLING NARRATIVE: KEY POINTS TO INCLUDE

The following questions provide a useful guide to gathering and addressing all of the key information that policymakers and the public will need to understand current challenges with the youth justice system in order to gain their support for transformation:



Which young people are being brought into the system and which young people are being diverted from the system (disaggregated by age, gender, race and ethnicity, community, offense charges, prior history)?

Youth justice system leaders should ensure policymakers are educated about the population of young people impacted by the system and break down data by race, ethnicity, gender, geography, sexual orientation, and disability status to illustrate any disparities in how young people are treated within their jurisdiction.



Which young people penetrate to the deeper end of the system, including removal from home and/or commitment to a youth prison or other restrictive placement, and why?

Policymakers in many jurisdictions assume only youth with chronic, serious and violent offenses are admitted to youth prisons or other congregate care. In many jurisdictions, however, over half of restrictive setting placements have been a result of sentencing relatively minor offenses or revocation of probation due to a technical violation.

It is crucial for system leaders to understand and dig deeper into the conditions that can lead to out-of-home placement, such as a parent's unavailability to bring their child home or their home and work responsibilities which might result in technical violations or status offenses.



How long are young people involved with the correctional system, and why?

States and counties differ widely on the length of time young people are held in out-of-home placement, as well as the length of time they remain under supervision by formal probation or aftercare programs. Jurisdictions with overly long terms of commitment and supervision increase the risk of the negative effects of incarceration and other coercive interventions, including recidivism.

Here again, system leaders must work to understand why young people might be in out-of-home placement for longer than needed, whether it is because of specific statutes, lack of community-based services or a need for communication between agencies.



How is the state or county spending the money allocated to the youth justice system?

While policymakers may be broadly familiar with the major line items they are rarely provided fiscal analyses that document how much money is being spent on which services for which young people. For example, they may be aware that the budget for a youth prison is \$15 million but unaware that the average daily population for the prison is less than 10 youth, resulting in an annualized cost of \$1.5 million per bed.⁴ Understanding staffing needs and ratios may also help to get a picture of high costs of incarceration.



What results are achieved by the current system?

Youth justice leaders should provide data on recidivism, youth well-being (educational attainment, health, mental health, job readiness as an adult, homelessness, etc.) and safety (reports of abuse, neglect or other mistreatment of young people in custody of the system). ■

4

To frame innovative solutions highlight:

- ✓ Alternative narratives to combat stereotypes of young people, who may be portrayed as thugs, predators, incorrigible, gang-bangers and other stereotypes; their families, who may be portrayed as uncaring, dysfunctional, criminal and in other negative ways; and communities, which may be portrayed as crime-ridden and lacking in any resources or positive role models.
- ✓ Research on youth development, including brain development; normative adolescent behavior; the drivers of adolescent harmful behavior, including the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences; the expanding number of effective interventions; and the fact that young people become much less likely to engage in harmful behavior as they mature.
- ✓ Research on the benefits of community-based alternatives to youth justice, including outcomes related to youth well-being, recidivism rates and public spending.
- ✓ Lessons from other jurisdictions, including policy approaches, lessons learned and adaptable models.
- ✓ Personal testimony about the need for and promise of reform from directly impacted youth and families, criminal justice actors and correctional staff.

5

Highlight and elevate the racial and ethnic inequities and injustices embedded in the current youth justice system.

Without acknowledging systemic racism and committing to dismantling it as part of their transformation efforts system leaders will never truly create change or earn the buy-in of the communities who are most profoundly impacted by the system, nor the advocates who fight on behalf of them. As part of this work system leaders can provide data and examples of the ways young people of color are at particularly high risk of harm if they come into contact with our current systems of youth justice. Lifting up and calling out the stark evidence of racial injustice embedded in current policies and practices is a powerful challenge to the assumed justice and equity



of the status quo and can help to build a sense of urgency for fundamental reform. For example:

- ✓ Compared to their white peers with similar behaviors, young people of color—especially Black youth—are more likely to be arrested, charged, detained, adjudicated delinquent, referred to adult court, assigned to probation supervision, charged with violating a technical provision of probation, placed out of home and placed into congregate and institutional incarceration.⁷
- ✓ The accumulated effects of daily encounters with racism, generational poverty, exposure to violence and diminished opportunity combine to make young people of color more likely to be struggling with toxic stress and trauma. Institutional incarceration exacerbates and triggers traumatic stress reactions and contributes to anxiety, depression and other mental health problems.⁸
- ✓ Time spent in congregate care or institutional incarceration is often time lost for opportunities for social and academic development. Young people of color are more likely to come from communities with poor educational and recreational resources. Rather than supplementing and strengthening developmental opportunities, congregate care and institutional incarceration reduce the educational and social development experiences available to young people.
- ✓ The stigma associated with justice system involvement has an even greater negative impact on young people of color,⁹ compounding the implicit and explicit negative biases associated with their race and ethnicity.

Youth justice leaders should reach out to organizations led by and advocating for people who are most likely to experience inequities and injustices, including people who are Black, Latinx, immigrants, gay, transgender and gender-nonconforming and people with disabilities. People in each of these groups are overrepresented in most youth justice systems and in deep-end correctional placements and commonly experience mistreatment and poor outcomes. Committing to transparency, sharing data and anecdotes illustrating inequities and forming alliances with



young people, their families, and those who advocate on their behalf are all necessary steps to building support for fundamental reform.

To collect this information youth justice system leaders may have to hire policy analysts or researchers to summarize relevant studies or to conduct the data analyses listed above. Leaders should reach out to local colleges and universities or to policy and research organizations with capacity to do this type of research. Leaders can also partner with advocates and others who can conduct concerted outreach to directly impacted communities to garner testimony on the need and opportunities for reform. The information gathered should be from both local and national sources but any implementation should take local context and needs into consideration.

Leaders too often give in to the impulse to avoid the press and other media at all costs. Their experience may be rooted in bad publicity associated with a high profile case where someone was seriously harmed by a young person or with some other negative event, such as an abuse scandal. However, leaders can still proactively share and bring stories of human interest that show the encouraging results of a positive youth development model. Building public understanding and appreciation for the good work and success of community services, supports and opportunities will help sustain momentum for change through possible setbacks. In addition, providing reporters with interesting stories will not only ensure accurate reporting but also help to develop ongoing relationships, trust and personal capital with the media. Having established relationships will enable leaders to get their messages out and navigate through crises or other setbacks that may occur.

ACTION STEP 6

Strategically deploy your narrative to build support for reform.

The next step is to deploy your narrative to build support for reform among multiple audiences. While gaining the support of elected and appointed



officials is critical, transformation requires much broader and deeper support among the general public and any groups with special interest in youth justice, such as victims' advocacy groups. Tailoring and packaging the narrative you have created for various audiences will be a key step in ensuring the effectiveness of this narrative in driving youth justice transformation.

In devising a public education and communications strategy, youth justice leaders should:

- ✓ Publicly commit to increased transparency about the system's operations, challenges and results, including inviting the media and others to tour facilities, encouraging profiles of successful community programs and regularly publishing dashboards and more in-depth reviews of system performance and outcomes
- ✓ Create a communications calendar to highlight opportunities to push messages out, such as just before legislative budget or policy hearings, through the annual state of the state address or in coordination with related important events and activities
- ✓ Work with young people, their families and community groups to combine and amplify personal stories and empirical data on current system challenges and the benefits of community-based solutions.
- ✓ Amplify messaging through a variety of media, including:
 - ✓ Research, infographics, policy reports and issue briefs, with accompanying one-pagers to reinforce your main points.
 - ✓ Stories in both traditional and nontraditional media outlets that update the public on reform efforts and their intersections with other local priorities.
 - ✓ Drafting op-eds that lift up the need for reform while anticipating and responding to potential concerns and objections.

- ✓ Social media campaigns that amplify key research findings, personal stories and upcoming events or actions.
- ✓ Community forums, including neighborhood meetings, town halls or panel discussions where the public can learn about reform from diverse experts, ask questions and offer insight.

Part of the public education and communications strategy will likely include inviting initial reactions to reform proposals and probing the priorities of interested groups, policymakers and the general public. Reaching out to these groups to explain plans for reform can provide opportunities for them to provide useful advice on how to move forward, as well as helping to inform the framing of messages so they reflect public interests and concerns. Distilling this information into a variety of formats and sharing it via diverse media can help make it accessible and compelling for broad audiences. ■

PREPARING FOR & ADDRESSING THE OPPOSITION

Ambitious reform efforts will inevitably face pushback, obstacles, and determined opposition. Building good working relationships with potential allies and supporters will be critical to sustaining momentum and responding to challenges.

When considering how to address the opposition leaders should build on the common desire across stakeholders to see young people succeed and frame changes in ways that speak to their concerns. For instance, engaging with correctional staff to listen to their insights and suggestions for reform, including their roles within it, might assuage fears of job loss and therefore reduce the likelihood of pushback from unions. Similarly, gaining support from a district attorney or judge and understanding their concerns might increase their use of programs and decrease pushback. Engaging with diverse stakeholders can also help to align reform goals and their vested interests, leading to a range of messages that might appeal to different audiences and address various concerns.

Leaders can help partners serve as spokespeople for reform, including by preparing them to respond to concerns and opposition. For example:



Directly impacted young people and their families can share their experiences with the existing system to further emphasize the need for reform. They can be important spokespeople for the vision of transformation, including at town halls, legislative hearings and advocacy events. Young people and their families can also speak credibly about what has worked for them, how

they can best be engaged, programs that have helped and what a relevant and successful community-based continuum requires.

- ✓ System actors will have strong credibility with some key audiences. They can share their professional experiences and rationale for supporting reform by meeting with their colleagues and drafting op-eds.
- ✓ State and local officials can amplify the public safety and fiscal benefits of reform, including during press conferences as well as in policy agendas.
- ✓ Community activists and other residents can lift up the many ways that investing in young people creates healthier communities for all, including via infographics and media they can share with their networks.

Using the communications infrastructure that they have developed, system leaders can both proactively and reactively address different narratives as they emerge. This means crafting the tools and structure to address and ameliorate resistance, which includes:

- ✓ Anticipating and preparing for episodic negative events that may lead to strong push-back. These events may include a young person committing an extremely harmful act, such as rape or murder, an uptick in drug-related violence and retaliation, a disturbance at one of the community programs, or a youth absconding from a limited security residential program. Critics are likely to tie these events to the efforts to reform the system, even when the overall trends and experience are headed in a positive direction.
- ✓ Preparing talking points that underscore the improvements in the new approach, while also responding directly to the concerns and challenges of the specific negative event. Youth system leaders should prepare to address the negative event directly, noting how it occurred and ways it will be addressed. It is particularly important to put the negative event in context, including reminders about how crises occur within the current system, that youth incarceration fails to meaningfully address or prevent harm (and is likely exacerbating it) and that a community-based, collaborative approach to transformation offers an opportunity for the public to work together in response to challenges.
- ✓ Continually reinforcing core messages. Youth justice systems are accountable for reducing the odds that young people impacted by the

system will commit harm in the future and for increasing the odds that young people will be on a path to opportunity and success. Both outcomes depend on investing in the well-being and success of all young people, their families and their communities. These investments will not only reduce harm but help communities thrive.

Strategies for proactively and reactively addressing opposition might include talking points that:

- ✓ Point to the simultaneous drop in crime and incarceration rates and strategies that have contributed to these trends.
- ✓ Emphasize the many negative effects of youth prisons, including high recidivism, physical and sexual abuse and other mistreatment of youth and terrible long-term developmental outcomes, all of which contribute to negative societal impact at extraordinarily high cost to taxpayers.
- ✓ Uplift community-based, family-focused alternatives to incarceration, including local examples and models from other jurisdictions.
- ✓ Draw on personal and professional expertise as rationale for reform. ■

NEXT STEPS

Below is a high level summary of next steps to take in your jurisdiction to begin building political and public will for youth justice transformation:



Build relationships with key stakeholders. Develop a list of the key groups and actors that must be engaged to build public and political will for transformation. These include system actors from across the youth justice system, policymakers, youth and families who have been impacted directly by the system, advocates and community-based organizations and service providers. It can be helpful to build relationships as well with more “unlikely” allies such as senior leadership and frontline workers in other youth- and family-serving systems; public health, mental health and other health professionals; academics and other researchers; residents of communities impacted by the youth justice system; labor unions and their members; and other community stakeholders such as business owners and educators. Connect with each of these stakeholders early in the reform process to better understand their perspective on the system and the potential path forward for transformation, identify collective goals and opportunities for collaboration and strengthen partnerships. Invest time in continuing to strengthen relationships through strategic follow-up, including recurring meetings, updates and invitations to events.



Form or join a workgroup or task force focused on youth justice transformation. Task forces and workgroups bring together key stakeholders to plan, design and/or oversee implementation. Examples include groups appointed by the executive, judicial and legislative branches, groups formed

by activists and advocates and other ad hoc or formally established groups. These groups bring together key decision-makers and other essential stakeholders, including young people, their families and communities, build a shared understanding of the operations and results of current youth justice approaches and work to develop a collective vision for transformation, set of goals and list of reforms. In some jurisdictions leaders will find that local advocacy and community organizations, including youth and families, have already been working in organized coalitions and groups to address the need for fundamental change in the youth justice system. In these places system leaders should explore whether they might either join and expand on these groups or coordinate with them in the formation of the task force or workgroup. Whatever the specific structure, establish a means for regular communication and problem-solving with the group of stakeholders relevant to transformation.



Develop a strategic communications plan. Begin to work on a comprehensive plan for communicating the vision of transformation. If staff with communications expertise are not already employed and available to help consider hiring or contracting with communications professionals to put together and implement a strategic communications plan. This plan will push forward the narrative as detailed in the action steps below and will include the landscape of available media, identification of key audiences, credible spokespeople to carry the message, tools and products that summarize key messages, plans for crisis communication responding to negative stories or push-back, a social media strategy, meetings and relationships with news outlets and media personnel and plans for hosting or speaking at conferences and events.



Identify and Educate Critical Targets of Influence. Transforming a state or county's approach to youth justice will require the engagement and education of many critical influential targets—people in positions of power who may require relationship building and education to become supporters and potentially vocal allies for transformation. This includes members of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. Learn about the current level of understanding of youth justice challenges and solutions among key decision-makers in each of

these groups and develop a conscious education campaign to address key gaps. Provide accurate, actionable data, detailed personal accounts from youth impacted by the system and other evidence that builds policymakers' understanding of the goals for the system and what is actually happening. Examples of this information and evidence may include regular dashboard reports and briefings, press releases and meetings with reporters and periodic "state of the system" conferences. Center the voices of youth and families in these communications and engagements with policymakers.



Build a Compelling Narrative About Your Jurisdiction, Calling for Transformation. Assess the landscape of political and public will for youth justice reform by examining what sources of information shape local dialogue and consciousness around the youth justice system. Examine local news reports on crime, safety and public financing; policy or research reports on the youth justice system; public officials and local leaders' public statements about public safety concerns and approaches; advocacy campaigns around youth justice; and trends in social media. Consider what information will develop the public understanding and will be necessary to drive change and shape a compelling narrative that responds to public interests and addresses gaps in understanding.

Effective messaging will convey the facts about who is in the system and why, current failures and harms of youth incarceration, including racial and ethnic disparities, and the benefits of community-centered, family-focused alternatives. Collect and elevate data (quantitative, qualitative and individual accounts) on the two core purposes of the youth justice system. Highlight racial and ethnic disparities and elevate the voices of young people who have experienced them. To frame innovative solutions highlight alternative narratives to combat stereotypes of young people, research on adolescent development, research on the benefits of community-based alternatives, lessons from other jurisdictions and personal testimony about the need for and promise of reform. Consider hiring policy analysts or researchers to summarize relevant studies or conduct the data analyses. Partner with advocates and others who can conduct outreach to directly impacted communities to garner testimony on the need and opportunities for reform.

**Strategically Deploy Your Narrative to Build Support for Reform.**

Utilize and act on the strategic communications plan that you have created. Publicly commit to increased transparency about the system's operations, challenges and results, including inviting the media and others to tour facilities to learn about the current system and need for transformation, encouraging profiles of successful community programs and regularly publishing dashboards and more in-depth reviews of system performance and outcomes. Create a communications calendar to highlight opportunities to get messages out. Work with young people, their families and community groups to combine and amplify personal stories and empirical data on current system challenges and the benefits of community-based solutions. Amplify messaging through a variety of media. Prepare for and address the opposition. ■

CHAPTER RESOURCES

Just Shut It Down: Bringing Down a Prison While Building a Movement

[VISIT LINK ↗](#)

Closing Youth Prisons: Lessons From Agency Administrators

[VISIT LINK ↗](#)

Sticker Shock 2020: The Cost of Youth Incarceration

[VISIT LINK ↗](#)

Youth Incarceration in the United States

[VISIT LINK ↗](#)

ENDNOTES

- 1 See [Youth Incarceration in the United States](#) from the Annie E Casey Foundation.
- 2 See Youth First's [Breaking Down the Walls: Lessons Learned from Successful State Campaigns to Close Youth Prisons](#).
- 3 See Urban Institute's [publication](#) on how to develop a dashboard for the adult system.
- 4 See [Sticker Shock 2020: The Cost of Youth Incarceration](#).
- 5 See the Youth First [Ready to Launch Toolkit](#) or the Urban Institute's [Closing Youth Prisons: Lessons from Agency Administrators](#) for holistic summaries.
- 6 See the [Empty Beds, Wasted Dollars Campaign](#).
- 7 See [Racial and Ethnic Disparities Across the Juvenile Justice System](#).
- 8 See [Research Roundup: Incarceration Can Cause Lasting Damage to Mental Health](#).
- 9 See [Returning Home: Incarceration, Reentry, Stigma and Perpetuation of Racial and Socioeconomic Health Inequity](#) for a summary of research on stigma of incarceration.

TAKING ON TRANSFORMATION