



Youth Justice Wisconsin Coalition Launch

Project Summary

December 2019

Background:

The state of Wisconsin has been engaged in youth justice reform for decades. The events of the past three years, including the *JJ vs. Litscher* suit and the unanimous support for Act 185, have signaled a consensus that the current system is not working.

Act 185 accomplishes the following: the closure of the two existing youth correctional facilities in July of 2021; authorization to build 2 new, smaller, state facilities and 5 secure county facilities to create a statewide system. The legislation also instructs the state to ensure that the new facilities align with a [Wisconsin Model of Youth Justice](#). The model is consistent with the Department of Children and Families [Youth Justice Vision and Strategic Plan](#) (2016). It emphasizes a community based, trauma informed, inclusive approach to youth justice that seeks to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities.

However, Act 185 was not able to provide the mandate needed to safely reduce the use of incarceration, and allocate resources to the community based support that is proven to decrease the need for incarceration and better support appropriate child and adolescent development. The appropriations within the bill do not cover the construction costs of this many secure facilities across the state and there is no funding provided for the level of programming at the facilities that is agreed to be best practice.

The 2018 [Kids Forward Report](#), and the 2017 Milwaukee Office of Violence Prevention, [Blueprint for Peace](#) indicate the urgency of investing in community driven strategies to reduce trauma, racial and ethnic disparities, and, therefore incarceration overall. We cannot say that Act 185 is enough to end the cycle of trauma and harm.

Identified Need:

Even with the above reforms underway, the Wisconsin Model of Youth Justice requires practices, policies and resources that may not currently exist or need to be realigned. In addition, community oversight is needed to improve current conditions at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake in accordance with the settlement of JJ vs. Litscher. For this reason the following partners came together in early 2019 to consider opportunities the necessary system changes: Youth Justice Milwaukee, ACLU-WI, Juvenile Law Center, Columbia Justice Lab, and Kids Forward/Race to Equity.

The group agreed that a statewide coalition is needed to advance the urgent needs within the youth justice system. There are three objectives to carry out under the umbrella of Youth Justice Wisconsin:

- **Advocate** to improve the current conditions in Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake youth facilities and reduce the number of youth held in those facilities.
- **Identify** the policies and resources needed to put the Wisconsin Model of Youth Justice into action AND what community based youth support look like.
- **Convene** impacted communities, local leaders, subject matter experts to operationalize safe and effective ways for Wisconsin prevent incarceration and support child wellbeing.

To launch the coalition, we convened key stakeholders in October 2019 to create urgency around addressing the underlying causes of incarceration and racial disparities within the current system in order to see true change in Wisconsin by 2021.

Building a Wisconsin Model of Youth Justice Convening- 10/30/19:

Planning and execution: This was a collaboration primarily between Kids Forward/Race to Equity, Youth Justice Milwaukee and Columbia Justice Lab. The following organizations offered subject matter experts: Haywood W. Burns Institute, Public Welfare Foundation, Columbia Justice Lab, and National Youth Corrections Leader for Justice. A total of 15 people played active roles in the event.

Cost:

Agenda included presentation and discussion about reducing incarceration, alignment with a public health violence prevention strategy and system partner work to build the Wisconsin Model of Youth Justice. Materials provided included two powerpoint presentations, four reports.

Outcomes:

- Attended by 60 people, including event team.
- The group was comprised of representation from 7 counties including: 5 elected officials, 6 state administrators, 10 county youth service administrators, 2 city administrators, 3 school representatives, 2 judges, 3 DA/ADA, 3 Office of Public Defender, 7 Prevention/Restorative Justice providers, 9 advocates, 6 national partners.
- Themes of discussion and future activities can be found in this SURVEY.

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- Immediate feedback indicated excitement and interest to develop detailed action needed for more prevention through public health models, and less reliance on prosecution and punishment.
- Facilitated stakeholder meetings between national partners and DOC, DCF and Governor's Policy Director to review pathways to Wisconsin system change.
- Facilitated debrief meetings in November to develop key recommendations. Top interests coincided with survey responses: action-oriented convenings focused on removing barriers to structural change that is indicated, much needed, and wanted.
- Discovered several state networks and initiatives that can be coordinated to leverage education and advocacy for structural change outside of Act 185 implementation. They include: Wisconsin Juvenile Justice Network; Wisconsin Court Intake Association; Wisconsin Counties Association Children and Families Committee; Department of Children and Families Training Initiatives and Child and Youth Leadership Teams.
- Several national partners have contacted Kids Forward and Youth Justice Milwaukee to express interest in supporting a comprehensive well being platform that includes: Eliminating Juvenile Fines and Fees, Raise the Age/Rethinking Justice for Emerging Adults, and community engagement and wealth building.
- Discovered that there are successful county based initiatives that could be scaled up or replicated in other areas to expedite a shift to school based partnerships, restorative practice and community based credible messenger programs.

Recommendations:

1. Continue discovery of existing networks that align with Youth Justice Wisconsin mission and establish appropriate scope of work, leverage resources, and avoid duplication.
2. Acquire funding for staff to coordinate statewide convenings and educational advocacy in alignment with other opportunities across Wisconsin.
3. Plan April and September convenings based on top survey and stakeholder debrief meetings. Topics: System Mapping and Strategic Planning; Honest Collaboration to Balance Accountability, Safety, and Youth Development. Goal: to build common knowledge of best practice and equity.
3. Formalize coalition structure to engage broad range of communities and individuals along lines of structural wellbeing, prevention and community justice.
4. Clearly define the racial equity impact analysis tools that will be needed to evaluate future policy, practice and funding.