



# MOVING POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE FORWARD: Lessons Learned from Investing in Public Systems

Prepared by Resource Development Associates  
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Dear Colleagues,

In introducing our 2011 *Renewing Juvenile Justice* report, I wrote that the goal for our collective work is to ensure that all young people have an opportunity to lead healthy lives and reach their full potential. In pursuit of that goal, Sierra Health Foundation launched the Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) the following year to improve the health outcomes for youth involved in the justice system. Over the last five years, Sierra Health Foundation and its funding partners, The California Wellness Foundation and The California Endowment, and later the Zellerbach Family Foundation, provided a variety of resources to public agencies to transform juvenile justice into a more just, effective system and improve the lives of the youth they engage.

We started by investing in county systems that demonstrated strong, forward-thinking leadership and a readiness for reform. We knew that systems transformation would be hard work, but we had strong partners who worked with us over the last five years. This report, commissioned by the foundation and prepared by Resource Development Associates, describes the progress made by our systems partners in San Joaquin and Solano counties toward less punitive, more developmentally focused juvenile justice systems. While the counties made progress, they also encountered many challenges. Reforming large, bureaucratic systems is a slow, incremental process. While we applaud the efforts of our county partners, we acknowledge that they are working in entrenched cultures that are often resistant to change.

As reflected in this report, we have used evaluation to learn from our investments in public systems as a path to juvenile justice transformation. Drawing on those lessons as well as our commitment to investing in the voices of communities who are often unheard, we decided that public agencies—those that are already working toward reform as well as those that are stuck in old ways of operating—would benefit from increased public demand for change. To that end, we are now working with coalitions of nonprofit organizations, faith-based leaders and youth and families most impacted by the juvenile justice system in 11 counties across the state to support their work in organizing for a healthy justice system. Our local partners are building the public and political will to promote the policy changes necessary to achieve the goal of ensuring that all young people have an opportunity to reach their full potential.

What we have learned in the first phases of PYJI led us to adopt a new approach to achieving the same outcome—improved health outcomes for youth engaged in the juvenile justice system—and we hope that this report provides the guidance to both funders and public agencies on the lessons learned and obstacles to overcome as they pursue their path toward reform.



Chet P. Hewitt  
President and CEO  
Sierra Health Foundation

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# 1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE INITIATIVE

The Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) grew out of lessons learned by Sierra Health Foundation through more than a decade of efforts to improve youth health and well-being, the latest research on youth impacted by involvement in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, and California's decision to realign its role in juvenile justice to counties. Through PYJI, Sierra Health Foundation sought to fulfill its mission of supporting health and racial equity by targeting the juvenile justice system—a system that is both the product and the source of entrenched policies and practices that disproportionately affect low-income families and youth of color.

## Building on past successes

Sierra Health Foundation has long invested in the well-being of California's youth, as supporting young people to lead healthy lives and reach their full potential is central to the foundation's vision of long-term racial and health equity. Findings from the foundation's youth-centered efforts, including its REACH Youth Development Program (2006-2010) and Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions report (2008), highlight the extent to which young people at the margins of society experience disparities in health and well-being. Most often, these are youth of color who live in communities with high rates of poverty, have experienced violence or other forms of trauma, and are more likely to be involved in systems such as child welfare and/or juvenile justice. These projects found that by using a youth-as-resources lens—building on youth's assets, rather than seeing youth as problems—they were able to strengthen the skills, confidence, and decision-making power of youth in their communities. With these findings in mind, the foundation knew it wanted to direct its next effort toward supporting healthy development and a successful transition to adulthood for California's most vulnerable youth.

## Drawing on emerging research and best practices

Around the same time that the foundation was considering what it had learned from its youth development efforts, several concepts that were already considered best practices in the mental health and education fields started to enter the arena of juvenile justice. Key among these were **positive youth development** and **trauma-informed care**.

A **positive youth development** framework recognizes and supports youth as assets, rather than as problems, in their communities. In *Positive Youth Justice: Framing Justice Interventions Using the Concepts of Positive Youth Development*, scholars highlight the benefits of applying positive youth development to the juvenile justice field by demonstrating that all youth should be meaningfully engaged and given opportunities to succeed.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to approaches that emphasize incarceration and probation supervision, a positive youth justice approach prioritizes interventions that contribute to youths' developmental needs around education, workforce, healthy relationships, and community engagement.

Originally coined in the mental health field in the late 1990s<sup>2</sup>, the concept of **trauma-informed care** entered the juvenile justice field around 2010. Significant research points to the role of trauma in youth involvement in both the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Failing to provide young people with services and treatment to address their trauma increases their risk of future involvement in the justice system and prevents them from reaching their full potential.<sup>3</sup>

1 Butts, J., Bazemore, G., & Meroe, A. (2010). *Positive Youth Justice: Framing Justice Interventions Using the Concepts of Positive Youth Development*. Washington, DC: Coalition for Juvenile Justice.

2 Wilson, C., Pence, D., & Conradi, L. (2013, November). Trauma-Informed Care. Retrieved from Encyclopedia of Social Work: <http://socialwork.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.001.0001/acrefore-9780199975839-e-1063>

3 Justice Policy Institute. (2010, July 7). Healing Invisible Wounds: Why Investing in Trauma-Informed Care for Children Makes Sense. Retrieved from <http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/1913>

At the time of PYJI's design, there had not yet been a unified effort in public systems toward a trauma-informed approach to juvenile justice. Sierra Health Foundation recognized the value of positive youth development and trauma-informed care approaches, and believed that combining the two should be at the core of its future youth development funding efforts. In addition, the foundation brought in research on gender-specific services—the idea that services should be tailored to the **gender-specific experiences** of children in the juvenile justice system—as well as **wrap-around service delivery**, a recognized best practice characterized by individualized, team-based care planning and intensive service delivery for individuals with complex, multi-faceted needs.<sup>4</sup>

In defining the target population for its next effort, the foundation was compelled by studies comparing the outcomes of youth exiting the juvenile justice system, child welfare system, or both systems. These studies found that youth with both a child welfare and probation history—termed **crossover youth** to denote the crossing over from the dependency system to the justice system—had far more negative outcomes as adults than those who had experienced only one of these systems as children.<sup>5</sup>

## PYJI THEORY OF CHANGE

Juvenile justice systems can better meet their public safety and rehabilitative goals by ensuring their most vulnerable youth achieve the behavioral and physical/mental health, academic, and pro-social outcomes associated with healthy transitions to adulthood. This will be done by incorporating the use of data and evidence-based practices that treat the effects of trauma, promote positive youth development, and deliver services in a holistic manner.

*-PYJI Briefing Paper*

## Leveraging a favorable policy context

At the national level, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the Department of Justice (DOJ) began to emphasize advances in behavioral and neuroscience research in their policy guidance, indicating a shift toward developmentally appropriate approaches to juvenile justice.<sup>6</sup> Around the same time, California state policymakers gave counties more control over public systems, including youth-serving systems, and rehabilitative rather than correctional approaches to criminal and juvenile justice. In 2011 and 2012, Governor Jerry Brown proposed closing California's youth correctional facilities. While these proposals were ultimately revised, they signaled a movement toward significant changes to the state juvenile justice system. The passage of Public Safety Realignment (Assembly Bill 109) in 2011 significantly changed the adult correctional system by not only shifting responsibility for certain offenses from the state to counties, but also placing a greater emphasis on treatment-oriented approaches to reducing recidivism and improving well-being.

*It became clear to us that California was beginning to have conversations around reforming the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems, so we had the wind at our back as we began to talk about [Sierra Health Foundation's juvenile justice efforts].*

**-Chet P. Hewitt, President and CEO,  
Sierra Health Foundation**

In this context, the foundation recognized an opportunity to advance juvenile justice reform and began to explore more deeply the challenges facing youth involved in juvenile justice systems, as well as opportunities for the foundation to be an effective agent for change in juvenile justice policy and practice across the state and nation.

4 Hewitt, C., & Cervantes, M. (2012, July). Positive Youth Justice Initiative Briefing Paper. Sierra Health Foundation. Retrieved from [https://www.sierrahealth.org/assets/PYJI\\_Briefing\\_Paper\\_Reprint\\_2013.pdf](https://www.sierrahealth.org/assets/PYJI_Briefing_Paper_Reprint_2013.pdf)

5 Culhane, D., Byrne, T., Metraux, S., Moreno, M., Toros, H., & Stevens, M. (2011). Young Adult Outcomes of Youth Exiting Dependent or Delinquent Care in Los Angeles County.

6 National Research Council. (2013). Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

## Creating a strategy for system transformation

Building on this policy context, as well as visits to several counties that had begun juvenile justice reform efforts, in March 2011 the foundation commissioned the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJCJ) to prepare a report examining the juvenile justice system in California and exploring the role of foundations in promoting systems change. Informed by the findings and recommendations of the resulting report, *Renewing Juvenile Justice*,<sup>7</sup> in December 2011 Sierra Health Foundation's board of directors approved a framework for a youth development initiative to improve youth outcomes through broad-based changes at the county level. The foundation then partnered with The California Endowment and The California Wellness Foundation, and later the Zellerbach Family Foundation, to fund PYJI, which was managed through The Center.<sup>8</sup>

### Distinct yet interdependent design elements

PYJI brought together emerging research to create an approach to juvenile justice reform that **invests in youth, treats trauma, provides wraparound service delivery, and changes how public systems operate to strengthen local infrastructure and sustain improvements.**

In addition to integrating positive youth development, trauma-informed care, and wraparound services, the fourth design element of PYJI centered on strengthening counties' operational capacity by improving data collection and reporting, institutionalizing the use of validated screening and assessment tools, promoting culture change through staff engagement and training, institutionalizing reforms in agency policies and practices, and leveraging additional funding sources. In addition, by supporting counties in identifying and addressing potential disparities in how their systems respond to youth of color, PYJI sought to advance consistent and equitable responses to youth across county systems.

The initiative initially focused on crossover youth with the rationale that beginning with the highest need youth would best enable the system to work well for all. In the final two

years of the initiative's initial phases, the foundation encouraged counties to expand their target population to all youth involved in the probation system, particularly those most at risk for returning to the system.

### The decision to focus on public systems

PYJI was designed to shift juvenile justice practice and policy by supporting California counties to design and implement system-level changes to improve the health and well-being of youth. By supporting counties in addressing the systemic issues that affect its vulnerable target population, the initiative sought to reduce barriers to successful transition to adulthood, including structural biases that exacerbate the over-representation of youth of color in county juvenile justice systems across the state. Sierra Health Foundation initially focused on public systems, which have the power to make changes that would institutionalize changes for sustainable and long-term impact. As one PYJI stakeholder described:

*The common goal was to recognize that these systems are somewhat archaic. They sometimes have novel reform ideas, but it's hard for them to flourish in a bureaucratic system. So who and how can we work with to move reform forward, to improve the lives of youth and their families? How do we utilize the good ideas out there and replicate them in ways that fit with each county?*

–Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice

The foundation intended for public agencies to partner with community-based organizations (CBOs), community leaders, and youth and their families to change how their systems serve justice-involved youth. Given that PYJI centered on youth development, the foundation encouraged counties to include justice-involved youth in the planning and implementation of PYJI.

<sup>7</sup> Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. (2011). *Renewing Juvenile Justice*. Sacramento: Sierra Health Foundation. (<https://www.sierrahealth.org/youthresources>)

<sup>8</sup> The Center is an independent 501(c)3 that leverages leadership, operational and funding support from Sierra Health Foundation and establishes investment partnerships with public and private funders, community members, community organizations, national, state and local government agencies, nonprofits and businesses. Taken together, each partner's unique insights, perspectives and resources make the work of The Center possible and clear the way for a healthier California. (<https://www.sierrahealth.org/the-center>)

## 2. KEY LESSONS FROM SYSTEMS-FOCUSED WORK

Over the first two phases of PYJI, several lessons emerged about how to implement positive youth development-focused initiatives within juvenile justice systems and how to design and manage systems change. These lessons are intended to inform other jurisdictions working to achieve similar systems change goals and other foundations or funders developing similarly focused positive youth development juvenile justice initiatives. More details about what the foundation did to encourage systems change, and the successes and challenges counties experienced in implementation, are provided in the following sections.

### Lessons for public agencies when implementing systems change initiatives

- **Develop a change management strategy.** Within agencies, leadership should develop a change management strategy to plan for and support the agency through changes. This should include plans for staffing and communication, identifying and leveraging staff champions, managing leadership turnover, providing opportunities for feedback, and measuring change.

- **Integrate systems change efforts.** PYJI lead agencies took many similar steps to implement systems changes. These activities—such as staff trainings, program development, interagency meetings, and the creation of structured decision-making tools—had similar goals, but varying levels of immediate and long-term impact. While distinct activities contributed to county successes, more important to systemic reform was the extent to which PYJI was incorporated throughout the county and integrated with other initiatives and change efforts.
- **Work collaboratively.** True systems change must be a collaborative partnership of youth-serving agencies across the juvenile justice system, education system, nonprofit sector, and other system stakeholders including youth and their families. Systems changes may be concentrated within particular agencies, but must maintain a focus on cross-systems collaboration. Engaging partners during the planning stages and establishing executive-level steering committees helps promote shared ownership, as well as secure collaboration and buy-in.



- **Embed and institutionalize systems changes.** Systems-level changes should be embedded throughout agency policies and procedures, not limited to specific units or programs.
- **Prioritize change.** Finally, agencies should prioritize systems change and view it as an urgent endeavor. Bringing about change is difficult, particularly in large bureaucratic institutions, and requires dedication and commitment.
- **Be clear about the end goal.** It is important for funders to maintain consistent messaging about the type of changes the initiative envisions, repeat that vision often, and communicate regularly with grantees about their progress. Funders should have a clear plan for how they will respond if grantees are unable or unwilling to make transformational changes.
- **Understand the culture of public systems.** Funders need to acknowledge how the organizational cultures of public systems and foundations can influence public systems-led initiatives. An overall framework with a vision for change may not be sufficient for some organizations, especially public systems that are used to working toward clearly specified performance measures. Sierra Health Foundation approached PYJI with a partnership orientation that provided counties with a high degree of autonomy; counties developed their own implementation plans and performance targets. The foundation intended to empower counties to adapt PYJI to their local context, but without more explicit directives, PYJI counties were sometimes unsure what was expected of them. Particularly when working with public systems, funders should consider the context as they engage public agencies in operationalizing the initiative's vision.

## Lessons for funders when investing in public systems-led initiatives

- **Assess readiness for transformation.** Sierra Health Foundation conceived of PYJI as an initiative that would lead to significant transformation of the juvenile justice system. As counties began to implement PYJI, however, their approaches were generally oriented toward incremental rather than major change—in effect, reform rather than transformation. Funders that support public systems-led transformation should ensure that participating agencies are not only philosophically on board with transformation, but also have the buy-in, political will, and resources necessary to achieve it.



### 3. WHAT THE FOUNDATION DID TO SUPPORT SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

To advance its vision of systems transformation, the foundation provided a framework for systems change, awarded grant funding to selected California counties, and provided technical assistance to support their implementation of the four PYJI design elements. The sections below describe the elements of the initiative, along with reflections from staff, system leaders, and technical assistance partners about what worked well and what could be improved about each element.

#### Provided a framework for systems change

The four integrated design elements identified above—positive youth development, trauma-informed care, wrap-around services, and operational capacity—provided a framework for the counties that participated in PYJI. Through funding and technical assistance, funded counties received support for implementing these components. Specific actions associated with each design element included:

- **Positive Youth Development.** Using processes such as sanctions and rewards matrices and including youth and communities in the implementation of PYJI.
- **Trauma-Informed Care.** Increasing staff awareness through staff trainings and use of trauma-informed care through new policies and job descriptions that specified skills appropriate for working with youth who have experienced trauma.
- **Wraparound Service Delivery.** Using a multidisciplinary and individualized approach to case management and increasing access to formal wraparound services for the PYJI target population.
- **Improving Operational Capacity.** Strengthening collaboration, improving data systems, and institutionalizing changes for sustainability.

As the initiative evolved, the foundation placed less emphasis on the four distinct elements and more emphasis on integrating these elements into a holistic systems change approach.

#### Reflections on the initiative framework

System leaders reported that they appreciated PYJI's design elements and the overarching focus on youth well-being. At the same time, evaluations of PYJI found that system leaders experienced a tension between how to implement the design elements in an integrated fashion while also needing to prioritize activities in the face of limited staff time and resources.<sup>9</sup> As a result, counties tended to focus their efforts on trauma-informed care training for their staff. Trauma-informed care was perhaps most tangible for staff to grasp, and counties were excited to get ahead of the curve with a concept that was beginning to be discussed more broadly in the juvenile justice field. Counties made progress in the three remaining design elements, but struggled to implement the elements as an integrated whole. In addition, while the foundation urged counties to include youth in the planning and rollout of PYJI, that expectation was either not met or implemented in very limited ways. Some PYJI stakeholders suggested that a more directive approach would have facilitated a deeper level of integration.

#### Awarded grant funding Phase I

In 2012, Sierra Health Foundation and its funding partners awarded one-year planning grants of \$75,000 to six counties to support the development of comprehensive, data-informed PYJI innovation plans. In October 2013, lead agencies in four of these counties—Alameda, San Diego, San Joaquin, and Solano—were awarded two-year implementation grants of \$400,000 each. Sierra Health Foundation selected the counties to receive implementation grants based on their level of need and the likelihood that system leaders would be successful in implementing systems changes, along with the degree of political and community will for reform. In three of the four counties, probation departments received funding

<sup>9</sup> PYJI evaluation reports are available at: <http://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation>

as the lead agency, while in the fourth county a city school district led the planning and implementation.

## Phase II

Recognizing that systems change takes time, the foundation, informed by an advisory board comprised of national juvenile justice experts as well as discussions with other leaders in the field, decided that if counties showed progress through the first two years of implementation, the foundation would consider extending funding to support continued efforts. After a competitive grant continuation process, the foundation and its funding partners awarded lead agencies in two counties—San Joaquin and Solano—with two additional years of funding to move into Phase II of the initiative. Phase II was not merely a continuation of existing activities; the foundation required counties to update their implementation plans to 1) expand their target population from crossover youth to all probation-involved youth, and 2) enhance partnerships with agencies that interact with youth, including law enforcement, schools, youth advocates and courts, which had in most counties been less involved in Phase I.

## Reflections on PYJI grant funding

Sierra Health Foundation intended the grant funding to generate county interest in the initiative and, for those counties whose applications were successful, to provide some financial support for their reforms. At the same time, the foundation purposefully kept the grant amount limited so that counties would not be led by the funding. In line with this intention, system leaders reflected that the grant amount was not a driving factor in their decision to participate in PYJI. Rather, counties valued the opportunity to receive technical assistance and to learn from one another throughout the implementation process. Leadership in the awarded counties were already invested in the idea of reform, and the grants served as an extra push to prioritize it. According to one system leader, “The amount wasn’t a lot. That was good—it made us focus on systems change.”

Some PYJI stakeholders asserted that to push this intention even further, the foundation might have considered awarding funding proportional to county size—or not including any grant funding at all, as other foundations have led initiatives that provide free technical assistance, but do not offer



funding. Some stakeholders also suggested that the approach of funding one lead agency, rather than multiple partners, may have hindered the collaborative approach among partner agencies within each county. One PYJI stakeholder shared, “I think if funding went to every agency involved, they might have more buy-in and carry more of the weight of it.” On the other hand, limited funding pushed county agencies to leverage additional funding sources to support sustainability after the end of the grant funding. Counties leveraged funding through sources such as Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities (RED) and Mentally Ill Offender Crime Reduction (MIOCR) grants through the California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC).

*The foundation should be praised for going out on a limb and inviting us to participate. The challenge, which they didn't foresee, is that an education system thinks differently from juvenile justice [agencies].*

*When they would bring us together, I don't think they were prepared for the discussions. We were literally talking apples and oranges. They were focused on the intervention aspect, instead of [a] school system that's focused on a preventative aspect.*

*–PYJI system leader*

Finally, PYJI stakeholders commended the foundation for its flexibility in investing in a local school district, when the grant was initially envisioned for probation departments. While this decision led to some initial challenges in adapting conversations about juvenile justice to a different context, in the end both the foundation and the school district gained knowledge from the partnership.

## Coordinated technical assistance

In addition to providing grant funding, the foundation recognized that PYJI counties would benefit from expert advice and guidance in order to successfully implement the desired systems changes. The foundation therefore partnered with established leaders in the juvenile and criminal justice fields to offer technical assistance to participating counties. Technical assistance providers also served as thought partners in the initiative:

- **Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJCJ)** assisted counties in maximizing wraparound at each stage of the juvenile justice system, with a focus on community-based organizations.
- **Center for Youth Wellness (CYW)** brought information about trauma-informed systems of care through community learning events, conference calls, e-mail correspondence, and webinars.
- **National Girls Health and Justice Institute (NGHJI)** offered staff training on Girls in the Juvenile Justice System and consulted with counties to pilot and implement the Girls Health Screen (GHS) tool.
- David Muhammad, Executive Director of **National Institute on Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR)**, assisted counties in developing positive youth development practices, including response grids as a decision matrix to guide probation officers on available sanctions and rewards.
- **W. Haywood Burns Institute (BI)** provided technical assistance to enhance operational capacity by consulting on methods for collecting and using data to address racial disparities and to drive policy.

Midway through the first year, with feedback from counties and technical assistance providers, the foundation introduced technical assistance liaisons, who worked closely with each PYJI county to help them formulate a technical assistance plan based on their needs.

## Reflections on PYJI technical assistance

System leaders appreciated the technical assistance offered, and technical assistance providers themselves noted that it was innovative for the foundation to offer free technical assistance. System leaders also appreciated that the foundation was willing to support counties in using technical assistance providers outside of those with contracts with The Center.

A number of factors increased the likelihood that counties would take advantage of the PYJI technical assistance resources. Discrete tools were concrete and simpler to implement than complex operational changes. For example, probation departments in all PYJI counties worked to implement graduated sanctions and rewards matrices, but lead agencies did not embrace the technical assistance to improve methods of collecting and using data in decision-making, and only one county fully leveraged the technical assistance for expanding wraparound services. Counties also gravitated toward technical assistance related to trauma-informed care, as it offered the opportunity to bring in knowledge that was becoming increasingly prominent in the juvenile justice field. When technical assistance providers had served as system leaders themselves, their shared experience facilitated rapport and trust with counties. When liaisons were added to help counties navigate and access the support they needed, one county reflected that the technical assistance liaison's support in connecting to resources and holding the bigger picture was key to navigating the myriad technical assistance resources available.

## Hosted grantee learning communities

The foundation brought lead agencies and their system and community-based partners together three times each year in learning community meetings. The purpose of these learning communities was to inspire, share learnings, and build relationships. The learning communities included keynote speakers, presentations, trainings, time to work in county teams, and time to learn across counties.

The foundation was intentional in encouraging counties to bring representatives from multiple partner agencies, such as community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and other county partners. In addition, counties were urged to bring staff from different levels, including probation officers and school personnel working directly with justice-involved youth. At some learning communities, youth advocates also participated.

*The learning communities exposed a lot of different trends and innovations. The trainings that occurred and the information sharing [were] helpful component[s].*  
–PYJI system leader

## Reflections on learning communities

System leaders, technical assistance providers and foundation leadership all reported that the learning communities were one of the most useful components of the initiative. System leaders appreciated the opportunity to learn from each other and to bring in staff from different levels. They shared that the learning communities were also a chance to re-ground and re-inspire their vision and passion for juvenile justice system transformation. Interestingly, both of the Phase II counties took the idea of learning communities and implemented them in their own counties as part of their PYJI activities.



## Other grant activities

### Site visits and progress reports

Foundation staff visited the funded counties annually to learn about their progress. During these visits, the foundation's PYJI Program Officer and Program Associate held meetings with each county's PYJI steering committee to discuss what was going well and what was challenging. Technical assistance providers also visited the counties to assess their progress and identify areas where they would benefit from further support. Foundation staff and technical assistance providers reflected that the site visits proved to be less useful than they had hoped. While counties used the site visits to show the foundation what they were doing well, the foundation and technical assistance providers wanted to have more forthright conversations about the obstacles encountered in order to work with the counties on solutions.

Counties submitted progress reports twice a year. Funded partners were expected to report on key elements of their progress, including partnerships formed, policies and practices changed, cross-system collaboration, and key successes and challenges during the reporting period. The Center did not establish performance targets for the counties. Instead, counties identified what they considered to be realistic targets for their implementation plans. This approach was intended to recognize that, while there was a common goal of establishing and integrating the four design elements, counties started with different strengths to build on and different challenges to address.

### Communications and advocacy

Sierra Health Foundation commissioned several reports to support counties in implementing systems reform.<sup>10</sup> The National Employment Law Project produced the *Advancing Employment Opportunities for California's Foster Care and Justice-Involved Youth* report to identify and promote youth employment strategies that target crossover youth. The Center for Youth Wellness created *Adverse Childhood Experiences, Toxic Stress and Implications for Juvenile Justice: A Guide for Positive Youth Justice*

*Initiative Counties* to support county leaders in implementing trauma-informed care. The nonprofit Zero Divide published the *Electronic Backpack Guide* to promote coordinated services and outcomes through mobile technology. Foundation staff also spoke at several conferences and state-level policy forums to promote the work of PYJI.

## PYJI VISITS NEW YORK CITY

One of the highlights of the PYJI learning communities was a trip to visit New York City's Neighborhood Opportunity Networks (NeONs). The foundation wanted to introduce California counties to the concept of NeONs, in which probation officers were co-located in community-centered organizations in local neighborhoods.

High-level leaders from multiple systems in each PYJI county participated. System leaders found the trip to be eye opening and inspiring—a tangible example of positive change. Following the visit, two out of the four Phase I counties pledged to incorporate a NeON-like model in their county.

*The learning communities were great, especially the trip to New York—that's where [our Probation Chief] got the idea from NeONs to decentralize and have a [multi-service center].*

-PYJI system leader

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/publications>



## 4. WHAT THE PYJI COUNTIES DID TO CHANGE SYSTEMS

While ultimately the first two phases of PYJI did not yield the type of transformational change that Sierra Health Foundation had hoped for, counties nonetheless made notable progress in reforming their juvenile justice systems. This section describes four areas of progress that were common across most PYJI counties: developing partnerships, providing training, expanding access to services, and establishing new policies and procedures. PYJI evaluation reports provide a more comprehensive review of counties' accomplishments.<sup>11</sup>

### Enhanced interagency partnerships and collaboration

Justice-involved youth frequently interact with multiple government systems, including probation, education, child welfare, behavioral health, law enforcement, and courts. To bring about systems change, it is therefore necessary to engage a wide range of public agencies and community-based organizations that provide services to justice-involved youth. To oversee and support PYJI planning and implementation, many PYJI counties established executive-level steering committees or leadership teams. These committees included representatives from a variety of public agencies and community-based organizations. Committees formalized partnerships through memoranda of understanding, which supported a shared sense of ownership over the initiative.

Counties also took a variety of approaches to deepen interagency partnerships across mid-level and line staff. One common strategy was collaborative meetings using models such as multidisciplinary teams (MDT) or team decision-making (TDM), as well as cross-trainings with staff from multiple agencies.

### HIGHLIGHTS: SOLANO COUNTY

Solano County's PYJI was led by the Vallejo City Unified School District (VCUSD). Key accomplishments included:

- Establishing a PYJI Taskforce Leadership Team with leadership from VCUSD, the Probation Department, the County Office of Education, Health and Social Services, the Superior Court, and several community- and faith-based partners
- Hiring a Positive Youth Justice Liaison to work directly with youth at participating high schools, engage families, and facilitate communication between schools, Probation, and other youth-serving agencies
- Restructuring Student Success Team (SST) meetings to better incorporate PYJI principles and partners
- Providing cross-agency trainings for VCUSD staff and probation officers in trauma-informed care, adolescent development, restorative justice, cultural responsiveness, and implicit bias
- Holding annual Positive Youth Justice Summits, public forums to discuss the county's youth development efforts
- Relocating a Juvenile Probation office to a multi-service center
- Assembling a youth justice leadership team at one high school to provide feedback about PYJI and mentor younger youth

<sup>11</sup> For more information about PYJI counties' activities, see previous evaluation reports at <http://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation>

The concerted focus on partnerships and collaboration enabled PYJI reforms to expand beyond individual agencies and break down silos in juvenile justice practice. By developing relationships outside of their agencies, leadership and staff could more easily and quickly troubleshoot issues pertaining to youths' transitions between different systems and provide more targeted referrals. For example, prior to PYJI implementation, some agencies were unable to track youth who were served by both the probation and the child welfare systems. By working together, agencies made modifications to their respective data systems to better identify crossover youth.

*I think one of the biggest lessons [from PYJI] was that we don't exist in a silo or island. That we can reach out to partners, whether school districts, community organizations, or faith-based organizations to assist us with serving youth... Realizing we're not the only ones doing this work, that others are willing and able to partner with us.*  
–PYJI system leader

## Integrated staff training

All counties provided staff training as part of PYJI implementation. The most commonly offered training was on trauma-informed care, with other trainings including adolescent brain development, positive youth development, restorative justice, mental health first aid, and alternatives to detention. Once new tools were developed—such as graduated sanctions and rewards matrices, and screening and assessment instruments—agencies also trained staff on how to implement these tools. Some agencies took a train-the-trainer approach, with the goal of building agencies' internal capacity to provide future trainings.

Counties used trainings to garner buy-in and enthusiasm for new approaches to juvenile justice practice. In particular, many probation departments used trauma-informed care training as a starting point in their efforts to support culture change, by teaching staff about how youth

are affected by trauma and how staff may experience vicarious trauma. System leaders and technical assistance providers identified training as key to shifting staff toward a trauma-informed perspective.

*Training on trauma-informed care has been helpful to see how youth have been through a lot and the reason their behaviors are the way they are. They have issues that need a treatment response and not a punitive response.*  
–PYJI system leader

Interagency trainings also strengthened relationships and promoted collaboration. Bringing staff together from different agencies facilitated communication, as staff acquired a shared knowledge base to communicate about concepts such as trauma-informed care and positive youth development.

## Increased access to services

Through PYJI, counties reviewed the services available to justice-involved youth and addressed gaps in their continuum of care. Throughout the initiative, counties expanded eligibility criteria, added services to existing programs, and developed new programs and services. Counties took a variety of approaches to increase access to services and facilitate service delivery. This included developing new positions to act as liaisons between families and the probation department, creating more opportunities for service providers and probation line staff to collaborate, and colocation of a probation department at a multiservice center with other providers.

Counties also increased access to wraparound service delivery. Many counties already had wraparound services in place, but had limited participation due to eligibility criteria and program capacity. Through PYJI, counties expanded wraparound slots and changed eligibility criteria to allow more youth the opportunity to receive wraparound services. For example, some probation departments previously only offered wraparound services to youth in placement. Through PYJI, they expanded wraparound services to youth and families throughout earlier stages of supervision.

## Institutionalized changes

In order to sustain improvements and institutionalize changes, public agencies created or modified their policies and procedures to better incorporate positive youth development and trauma-informed care. Probation departments, with support from technical assistance providers, rewrote supervision and detention policies and provided staff training about these modifications. Lead agencies also revised job descriptions and performance assessments to emphasize positive youth development and trauma-informed, holistic service provision. For example, one probation department revised its job descriptions to specify that probation officers must take a rehabilitative approach to working with clients and are expected to make service referrals and implement evidence-based practices.

Probation departments also developed and implemented tools to support structured decision-making, a data-driven, research-based approach to inform decisions about how individuals move through the justice system and how probation officers respond to clients' behavior. By creating an objective and systematized process, structured decision-making can also reduce racial and ethnic disparities within the juvenile justice system. Through PYJI, some probation departments implemented risk assessment tools to inform decisions about which youth are detained in juvenile hall, and graduated sanctions and rewards matrices to ensure that probation officers have a wide range of responses to help change youths' behavior. These tools aligned department policies with best practices that stress detaining only high-risk youth and the importance of rewarding positive behaviors. One county also implemented the Girls Health Screen, a screening tool designed to support counties in better meeting the needs of youth with gender-responsive programming.

## HIGHLIGHTS: SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY

San Joaquin County's PYJI was led by the San Joaquin County Probation Department.

Key accomplishments included:

- Establishing a PYJI Executive Steering Committee comprised of leadership from the Probation Department, Child Welfare, District Attorney's Office, Public Defender's Office, Healthcare Services, and several community partners
- Creating a PYJI data sharing agreement with 17 agencies serving crossover youth
- Implementing Youth Development Groups at three partnering community-based organizations
- Initiating monthly meetings between probation supervisors and officers and CBO staff
- Developing a Parent Partner position to inform and engage families about the juvenile justice system and PYJI services
- Implementing a sanctions and rewards matrix to guide probation officer responses to youth behavior
- Modifying probation supervision and detention policies to align with positive youth development principles



## 5. WHAT HURDLES THE PYJI COUNTIES FACED

As counties made significant progress in developing partnerships, providing training, expanding access to services, and establishing new policies, they also faced obstacles to implementing reforms and meeting the goals of the initiative for transformational change. Counties experienced four main challenges in their systems change efforts: inconsistent staff buy-in, competing priorities, limited data capacity, and incomplete stakeholder engagement.

### Inconsistent staff buy-in

For the most part, the executive leadership of agencies involved in PYJI were similarly aligned in their vision for systems reform. However, while some line staff embraced a positive youth development approach to working with youth, the fact is that most juvenile justice agencies—and many schools as well—have operated from a punitive mindset for many years. This organizational culture is long-standing and takes time to shift. As a result, line staff were not always on board with the positive youth justice approaches put forth through PYJI. Data from youth surveys and focus groups demonstrated that the quality of their relationships with probation officers, school officials, and service providers depend largely on individual staff persons, rather than on a system-wide approach.

Two related reasons contributed to inconsistent staff support for reform. First, some staff believed that PYJI was a passing fad with a short lifespan. Some probation officers who participated in the evaluation focus groups described probation work as a pendulum, constantly fluctuating between social work and law enforcement mentalities. Many of these officers had seen initiatives come and go over the years, and believed that PYJI's changes would be temporary. Second, some staff felt that PYJI's focus on limiting punitive sanctions would decrease youth accountability. Though these staff often expressed agreement with the concepts of trauma-informed care and positive youth development, they

ultimately believed that punitive responses are an important tool to facilitate behavior change and should not be curtailed. While buy-in increased over time, it remained a considerable challenge to PYJI implementation.

*Another barrier is the buy-in from the staff. It continues to be a barrier, but not as much as it was initially. Because we were changing how we did business and gave rewards, some people thought we were rewarding them for doing something wrong. It took a lot of education to understand it's not rewarding them [the youth] for doing something wrong, but responding to positive behaviors.*

—PYJI system leader

### Competing priorities

Systems change initiatives require a great deal of time for planning, training, and implementation. For some agencies, competing priorities reduced the amount of time that leadership and staff could devote to the initiative. Staff expressed concerns that new responsibilities regarding assessment, relationship building, and documentation were unrealistic, given existing workloads. Staff were most likely to share these concerns when their agency's data systems did not yet support new practices. In some counties, new staff were hired to manage the coordination and implementation of PYJI efforts. This somewhat alleviated workload concerns, but also risked promoting a perception of PYJI as a centralized program implemented by specific staff, rather than a system-level reform.

Competing priorities also contributed to challenges with consistently holding interagency meetings. In particular, team-based decision meetings, which took place between probation officers and other youth-serving agencies (e.g., social workers, behavioral health specialists, and school staff), were difficult to conduct due to staff availability and schedules.

## Limited data capacity

Though counties made progress toward identifying crossover youth across their multiple data systems and developing data sharing agreements, most counties identified data capacity and data sharing as ongoing challenges. Agencies' data systems were structured differently, creating obstacles in merging data. In addition to technological limitations, agencies also had difficulties navigating real or perceived legal and confidentiality concerns around data sharing. Without robust data sharing, staff would instead rely on personal relationships with staff from other agencies to receive updates about youth progress.

*One of the big takeaways from our work was how poor the data systems were in these systems... the inability of many systems to identify which kids had crossed over from the child welfare system, how child welfare experiences related to current experiences and behaviors. It was really alarming that in the age of big data, these systems knew so little about the life experiences of children in their care.*

—Chet P. Hewitt, President and CEO,  
Sierra Health Foundation

## Incomplete stakeholder engagement

Within each county, a core group of agencies worked together to oversee PYJI planning and implementation. Lead agencies did not waver in their commitment to the initiative, but counties struggled to keep all partners consistently engaged and to bring all relevant stakeholders to the table. For example, child welfare agencies became less involved in PYJI when the initiative's focus expanded to all youth in the juvenile justice system, not just crossover youth. For the most part, counties also had difficulty partnering with schools (in the counties where probation departments were the lead agency), law enforcement, and the judiciary. These partners are especially important because they possess significant influence in determining who enters the juvenile justice system. Recognizing their importance, the foundation directed counties to expand these partnerships as part of Phase II of PYJI; nevertheless, challenges with engaging these partners persisted.

Several factors led to challenges with system-wide engagement. In some cases, agencies did not recognize a need for PYJI in their community—they believed they already provided the appropriate services and resources to support justice-involved youth. In other cases, agencies did not clearly understand their role in the proposed systems changes. Because agency participation was usually dictated by the priorities and beliefs of agency leadership or the larger political system within which they operate, leadership turnover or changes in the political landscape also threatened the engagement of partner agencies.

*It pains me to see that [the local school system] isn't engaged in [PYJI]. They do have a police department—that's kind of an entry point for young people into [the] justice system that we don't have control over. With them not part of [PYJI], it's difficult to have conversations about what we're trying to change.*

—PYJI system leader

Additionally, most counties did not achieve meaningful engagement of youth and families. While some counties held community forums, and one county created a youth leadership team, there were not clear or ongoing opportunities for youth and families to provide input on system reforms. Stakeholders provided two explanations for low levels of community involvement. First, some counties were unaccustomed to working collaboratively with justice-involved youth, families, and community members. These counties did not know how to structure the initiative to facilitate their involvement, and the initiative provided no requirements or technical assistance to ensure meaningful community representation. Second, some counties may have feared that increased community participation would slow progress, particularly if the county had a large number of active community-based organizations or hostile relationships between advocates and justice agencies.

## 6. CONCLUSION: RECOGNIZING LIMITATIONS AND SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE

At its heart, PYJI aims to transform juvenile justice practice and policy into a more just, effective system that is aligned with the developmental needs of young people. One of the key lessons learned from the first two phases of the initiative is that it may not be realistic to expect public systems to spearhead far-reaching, transformational changes given the multitude of barriers they face—resistance to and fear of change, slow bureaucratic processes, and leadership turnover being among the most problematic. Thus, while funded counties made great progress in moving toward systems that treat and support youth in a more holistic and developmentally appropriate manner, ultimately Sierra Health Foundation felt that the approach fell short of the transformational change that PYJI sought to promote.

*When you start with the communities most impacted by mass incarceration, you get more transformative thoughts on how to change the system, because the pain is real. Start there.*

—Matt Cervantes, Associate Director of Health Programs, Sierra Health Foundation

The third phase of PYJI—Organizing for a Healthy Justice System—represents a shift of investment from the grasstops (systems) to the grassroots (community) that builds on the lessons learned in the first two phases of PYJI, acknowledges the challenges of changing organizational culture and achieving systems change from within, and allocates resources to a community advocacy approach to transforming systems. By shifting its lever of change from the top down to the bottom up, Sierra Health Foundation and its funding partners aim to accelerate systems transformation by investing in communities most impacted by the juvenile justice system who are using their expertise and passion to bring about change.

*[We are] still driving towards the same goal, just with a different approach. We'll do that by focusing on community leaders who are committed to seeing that health and well-being is embedded in efforts to reform our juvenile justice systems.*

—Chet P. Hewitt, President and CEO, Sierra Health Foundation



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[www.shfcenter.org/positive-youth-justice-initiative](http://www.shfcenter.org/positive-youth-justice-initiative)