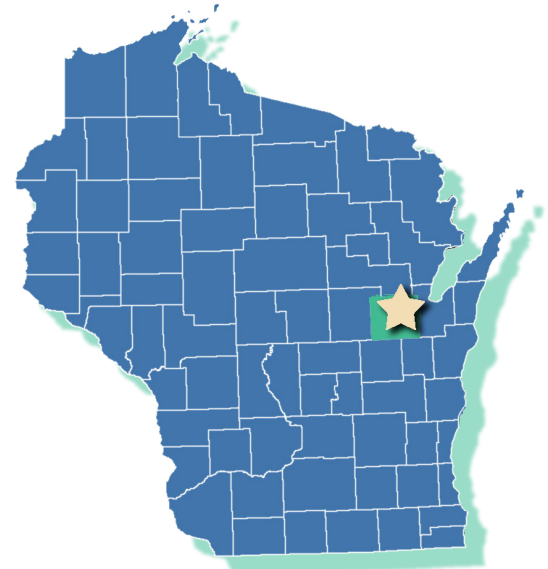


COUNTY LEADERSHIP IN JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM:

OUTAGAMIE COUNTY, WISCONSIN

Population (2013 Census Estimate): 180,345
Youth Population: 43,824 (24.3 percent)
**Main Community Makeup: 75 percent Urban,
25 percent Rural**
Persons Below Poverty Level: 8.6 percent



THE IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

In the mid-1990s, Outagamie County faced a juvenile justice budget that was growing dramatically—so dramatically that even the county’s increased tax revenue was not enough to cover the rising costs in juvenile justice. At the same time, county leaders saw that the services being provided to kids were inappropriate or inadequate and the detention center was overcrowded. For example, Wisconsin state law changed around this time to prohibit placing youth in detention for status offenses, but Outagamie County was still detaining these youth. “There was a waiting list for juveniles who had been convicted of a crime to be placed in the detention center, when kids who were in there were there for running away—how did that make any sense?” explains Helen Nagler, Chairperson of the Outagamie County Board of Supervisors. Additionally, in 1995 a gang-related murder/suicide that resulted in the death of four young people in the county led to a broad community desire to address youth issues and improve services available.

THE CHANGE ENVIRONMENT

Until 1996, juvenile justice and child protection services were administered within one division in Outagamie County. After the tragic events in 1995, the county commissioned a study of its youth-serving systems, and ultimately decided to form a new division (called Youth and Family Services) to assist youth involved in delinquency or status offenses. Strong support from the board of supervisors, the county executive and the sheriff helped propel this change. “Supervisor Nagler and

others on the county board and those involved in administration determined that we really needed to develop an infrastructure of community-based interventions and treatments,” says Mark Mertens, Manager of the Youth and Family Services Division. Along with rising costs and an overcrowded detention center, there were coordination issues among the employees working with youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Staff were located in different buildings scattered across the county, which often made coordinating treatment and care difficult.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Introduction of an objective assessment tool
- Reduction in racial and ethnic disparities in juvenile arrests
- Shift to evidence-based interventions and ongoing evaluation of those programs
- Improved collaboration among juvenile justice staff
- Reintroduction of 17 year olds into juvenile justice system
- Closure of juvenile detention center

Additionally, Outagamie County has historically had a strong health and human services department with a focus on preventative care, and county leaders realized it was important to hold on to that focus. “We’ve always had the feeling that if you don’t do something up front, you’re going to pay more for it,” says Supervisor Nagler. “We don’t want to end up at the high-cost end of treatment.”

Outagamie County underwent a second phase of reforms in 2009, when it began participating in two initiatives to reduce racial and ethnic disparities: one through the Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance and one through the MacArthur Foundation’s *Models for Change* Initiative.

OUTAGAMIE COUNTY’S MODEL

Outagamie County’s changes aimed to make its juvenile justice division independent and focused on community-based treatments. To enhance these goals, Outagamie County invested in the construction of a new building dedicated solely to juvenile justice services. This allowed for all workers involved with these youth to be in one location, along with various youth programs, which led to the formation of new communication systems (both formal and informal) and increased collaboration. This new construction was a large up-front investment, but because the building was specifically designed for its current use, it has saved the county money in the long run through better efficiencies and even reduced staffing. Currently about 45 staff members work in the building, and the county’s juvenile justice programming is also housed there.

Outagamie County leaders understood that there may be high initial costs at the outset of reform, but were willing to shoulder that burden in order to see savings in the future. In fact, the county double budgeted for juvenile justice for the first three years, paying to keep the old system in place as the transition to more treatment-focused options were developed. “It was a real risk to double budget like that,” says Mark Mertens. “But the leaders were confident it would work and felt it was really necessary to make our system better.” “We were patient, and we waited several years before we even thought about declaring that the new system was working,” adds Supervisor Nagler. “The important thing is what is in the best long-range interest of your community. Sometimes you just have to take a risk, but this almost didn’t even feel like a risk because what we were doing wasn’t working and the changes couldn’t be any worse.”

In keeping with the county’s commitment to intervening early, **Outagamie County has also voluntarily taken 17 year olds back into its juvenile justice system.** Wisconsin state law treats 17 year olds who are charged with crimes as adults, but Outagamie County leaders felt those youth were not being served well in the adult system, says Supervisor Nagler. “Kids can’t leave the community,” she says. “You have to help them and take care of them, or you’re going to have to deal with them again when they’re adults.”

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JUVENILE PROGRAMS

- Restorative justice victim-offender mediation offered to all victims of youth crimes
- Report Center
- Mentoring Program
- Aggression Replacement Training (ART)

- Independent Living Program
- Cognitive Intervention Program
- Wraparound Services
- Families In Action Program
- Use of Shelter Care for Most 72-Hour Holds

Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities

As Outagamie County continued its focus on community-based treatments, leaders began to concentrate on reducing racial and ethnic disparities (RED). As part of the *Models for Change* Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) Action Network, the county focused on reducing the number of disorderly conduct arrests. The county has a strong DMC governing body that is co-chaired by the deputy district attorney and focuses on identifying and monitoring reforms.

Through its two RED initiatives, Outagamie County has focused on a number of innovative practices, such as:

- **Implemented the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI) tool**, to assist with objective assessments and decision making regarding youths' risks, needs and protective factors.
- **Provided special training to juvenile justice staff to enhance case planning and intervention strategies.** This has allowed the county to focus on targeting the most critical (criminogenic) needs of youth to reduce risk to the community and prevent further arrests, explains Mark Mertens.
- **Contracted with a consultant to collect and analyze data**, which helps the county assess its programs and spending, and continue to support appropriate programming and make changes when necessary.

SUCCESSES AND OUTCOMES

Thanks to the reductions in the use of secure detention of youth over the course of several years, the Outagamie County Juvenile Detention Center was closed on January 1, 2014. **Supervisor Nagler notes that the county has saved huge amounts in "cost avoidance," including approximately \$700,000**

year in staffing and operations fees. In 2007, for example, the county paid for more than 2,400 days of care in juvenile detention, compared to 552 in 2013. The rate of incarceration of youth in the state Juvenile Correctional Institutions has also fallen significantly. The state charges the county \$301 per day per youth at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake schools, and Supervisor Nagler estimates that if the county was continuing to detain as many juveniles in these institutions as it did in the early 1990s, costs would be around \$2.2 million today. **Overall juvenile justice costs to the county have decreased \$336,087 from 2005 to 2013.**

Outagamie County's work to reduce RED has also led to a reduction in racial disparities at arrest, which was the county's most disparate decision point and most in need of improvement. In 2004, African-American youth were 7.5 times more likely to be arrested than white youth, while all minority youth were nearly 3 times more likely to be arrested than white youth. Those numbers decreased to 6 times more likely and less than two times more likely, respectively, in 2011. "We still have a lot of work to do, but this data shows that we are moving the needle in the right direction," says Mertens.



Mark Mertens, Manager of the Outagamie County Youth and Family Services Division, and Helen Nagler, Chairperson of the Outagamie County Board of Supervisors

LESSONS LEARNED

Initial investments in good staff and facilities are worth the extra cost: When Outagamie County decided to revamp its juvenile justice system leaders realized the importance of having a person with expertise at the helm and a building that worked for them. “If you’re going to make a major change like this, you have to find someone who knows how to do it,” says Commissioner Nagler. “You can’t just do it on the cheap—and in the end, the savings have far outweighed that initial cost.”

Progress isn’t always easy or consistent: “Sometimes you’ll go two steps forward and one step back,” explains Commissioner Nagler. “You have to realize that’s normal and to be expected, and you have to work through it and keep pushing to get where you need to go.”

Winning over skeptics might be easier than you think: At the outset of Outagamie County’s reform efforts, the sheriff visited many parts of the community to talk to residents about the plan and elicit feedback. By taking the time to explain what changes were being made and why, the sheriff made sure that community members felt like they were a part of the process and garnered support at the front end. Similarly, the sheriff, county board and county executive all made sure to have open lines of communication with local judges, police officers and schools, in order to address and alleviate their concerns and keep them updated as positive outcomes were achieved. “Once they saw how the new system was working, they got on board really quickly,” says Commissioner Nagler. “If you start talking about the successes, the community will really come with you and trust that you’re working for them and with their best interests in mind.”

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