

County Concerns:

THE ROLE OF COUNTY OFFICIALS IN JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM

Counties are the primary provider at the local level of health, social services and juvenile and adult corrections, giving county governments and leaders a unique and important role in improving juvenile justice systems. With so many stakeholders involved in the juvenile justice system, leadership from elected officials is critical to establishing objectives, eliciting buy-in from the many interested parties and continually motivating others to accomplish set goals.

SET AGENDA

County officials are often faced with the question, “Why focus on juvenile justice when it is such a small part of the budget?” By considering the significant downstream implications (financial and human) of not intervening early and appropriately to the needs of youth, county officials can be important conveners, framers and leaders in this area. They can bring juvenile justice reform ideas to the forefront of their county’s agenda and realign policies and spending priorities to promote reform. They can encourage the formation of working groups to pinpoint problems and gather data, bring together stakeholders from various agencies and engage the community in efforts to enhance juvenile justice programs.

IDENTIFY NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

For elected officials, it is important to identify and assess their jurisdiction’s particular needs. What challenges does the community face with its juvenile justice system, and what opportunities exist to improve outcomes and increase efficiencies? In particular, successful system improvement requires the collection, analysis and use of data. It is imperative to know who is in the juvenile detention center, what services are offered and actually used, how much money is spent on detention and services, etc. Good decisions—from budgetary choices to assessing treatment options to identifying a population on which to focus—must be data-driven and reflect the needs, resources and limitations of the county. Leadership from county officials is critical in identifying the need for and establishing mechanisms

through which the county can collect and use good data. It is often as important to understand what questions counties can answer and which they cannot.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS OF THE RIGHT PEOPLE

County officials should engage stakeholders at all levels and organizations, including non-profit agencies, faith-based organizations and businesses in the community. Successful reform depends on collaboration between multiple government entities, as well as between public and private agencies. Elected officials are well positioned to bring together uncommon allies, engage primary stakeholders from all possible organizations and encourage active participation and collaboration to facilitate thoughtful consideration of key juvenile justice and youth services questions.

Some of the individuals who should answer these questions include directors of juvenile justice and human services agencies, juvenile court judges and staff, the county administrator or county manager, detention center staff, school employees and any other organizations that might provide services to you.

The following page contains suggested questions to help get you started.

WHAT IS OUR STARTING POINT?

What do we do well in our juvenile justice system? What youth and families are best served? How do we know that?	
What are the major challenges in the juvenile justice system (overcrowded detention center, racial and ethnic disparities, etc.)?	
What systems/agencies/programs/facilities are most used by juveniles in the justice system?	

HOW COST EFFECTIVE ARE OUR INVESTMENTS?

In what systems/agencies/programs/facilities are the costs greatest? Where are the costs greatest per youth served?	
In what systems/agencies/programs/facilities are the outcomes not meeting expectations?	
In what systems/agencies/programs/facilities are the outcomes most positive?	
What interventions are most cost effective?	
Are there specific programs the county would like to improve/add/change?	

WHAT DO WE KNOW? WHAT DON'T WE KNOW?

What data are currently being collected?	
How are these data being used and/or analyzed?	
What other data need to be collected?	
Who or what agencies can collect and analyze needed data?	
What data does each agency or stakeholder need to achieve success? Who has those data?	

WHO IS AT THE TABLE? WHO NEEDS TO BE AT THE TABLE?

How does the juvenile justice system or detention facility collaborate with other agencies or service providers? Are there any relationships that can be expanded?	
How are schools involved with youth in the juvenile justice system? How is child welfare and dependency involved? How are other systems involved?	
How could those partners be involved if they are not already? How could they be engaged to participate as partners?	
Who are existing and possible champions for juvenile justice reform? Who should be included in conversations? What relationships exist versus what relationships need to be forged?	
Are there local businesses or philanthropies that would be interested in investing in juvenile justice reform?	

WHAT CHALLENGES DO WE NEED TO OVERCOME?

What budgetary restrictions exist?	
What cultural changes need to happen?	
What policy changes may need to be made?	
What other challenges might arise?	
How can these be overcome?	

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