



WAYNE STATE  
School of Social Work  
Center for Behavioral Health and Justice



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# Creating the best possible youth justice system

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Facilitating change management for the Wayne County  
Third Circuit Court from June 2019 through July 2020

March 2023





## Background

As the most populous county in Michigan, Wayne County serves the largest youth justice caseload in the state, providing youth justice services to an estimated 2,000 youth annually. The three changes outlined in this report focus on the front end of this system. They include: (1) identifying a youth's risk for reoffending and addressing identified needs early on; (2) making referrals for diversion or other placements based on an objective risk assessment tool; and (3) assigning defense counsel early in the court process to provide for more effective representation. These changes are expected to have a significant impact on Wayne County youth and their families as through these changes, it is believed that youth who come into contact with the justice system will be more able to participate meaningfully in the appropriate program interventions and reduce the likelihood of their recidivism. In addition, serving youth in the least restrictive environment with effective interventions should result in long-term cost savings for the Court and the County, along with a reduction in adult criminal justice contact.

Research supports these changes. A growing number of youth justice experts suggest that a more effective approach to reducing recidivism is identifying a youth's risk of re-offending, then matching services to their specific risk factors and responsiveness to specific types of interventions. A significant body of evidence suggests that the use of these risk-need-responsivity principles will lead to better outcomes in the justice system, mainly with respect to decreased recidivism rates (Andrews and Bonta, 2010, 2017; Dowden and Andrews, 1999; Lipsey, 2009) and decreased reliance on high levels of probation supervision (Luong and Wormith, 2011). Research has also demonstrated that the severity of the first offense is not a significant indicator of future patterns of offending (Mulvey, 2010), and that the majority of low-risk youth are unlikely to reoffend even with little to no intervention (Lipsey, 2009). Given the cost of youth justice programming and the higher cost of confinement of youth offenders, it benefits youth, the Court and youth justice agencies to sort youth offenders by risk of re-offending, divert low risk offenders away from the youth justice system, and focus services on those at high risk of re-offending (Vincent, 2016).





## Approach to change

While there are many examples of effective community collaborations, every community is unique and so too are the types and complexities of the problems they are trying to address. To develop the approach to change for the Wayne County Third Circuit Court, the Center for Behavioral Health and Justice at the Wayne State University School of Social Work (CBHJ) considered a variety of successful community collaborations, ones that addressed a broad range of social, environmental and economic issues as well as collaborations specific to improving outcomes in the child welfare or youth justice systems. They also reviewed the CBHJ's community engagement work in various counties throughout the State plus their own experiences as practitioners to glean commonalities for success.

What they learned – and what the research supports – is that successful processes have a striking similarity in how they are designed and in the values they uphold. Building upon this, the CBHJ determined that a successful effort to address the systemic problems identified by the Court would benefit from structured strategic facilitation, strong community leadership and a building of collaboration among key partners who hold differing perspectives.

It would also require a set of core principles. Pulling from research plus their work in the field, the CBHJ team identified the following principles to guide the process:

- Ensure that all community partner groups have a seat at the table.
- Be open to hearing all perspectives before major decisions are made.
- Communicate in ways that foster respect and encourage conversation.
- Cultivate a sense of collective responsibility and personal investment.
- Utilize leadership and professional expertise to design and guide the process.
- Maintain an ongoing commitment to the process and to the value of public deliberation as a way to solve problems facing a given community.

Over thirteen months, team members led key partners through a series of **five steps**:

1. Setting the context for the work, including identifying key values and determining key questions to be addressed.
2. Determining the desired changes they wanted to make.
3. Clarifying the steps needed to implement these changes.
4. Determining what success would look like and how it would be measured.
5. Creating a three-tiered governance model to ensure fidelity and sustainability.

The results exemplify what the evidence from research as well as practitioners have documented – that when core underlying principles are in place and inform all steps of a change process, community partners can work effectively together to address problems and meet the needs and interests of those most impacted. Agreed-upon solutions emerged from a deliberative and inclusive process where diverse perspectives were invited and encouraged. Over time, levels of trust developed that allowed the blending of viewpoints and ideas, however polarized they may have seemed at times. This inclusive, open process ensured that the final result was indeed the work of the whole community that had a collective stake in its success.

A successful effort would encompass structured **strategic facilitation**, strong **community leadership** and a building of **collaboration** among key partners who hold different perspectives.



# Step 1: Setting the context for the work

During the first several meetings, key partners worked to create the foundation for upcoming discussions around determining the desired system changes. This foundation was critical as it allowed the group to begin to build trust with each other as well as understand each other's unique perspectives on the youth justice system. **Six** such discussions were held.

## Key values

These values would serve as the driver for all decisions around any proposed system changes proposed for the Wayne County youth justice system. These values were generated at the first meeting and reviewed once there was an agreement on the proposed system changes to be implemented. Committee members unanimously agreed that all changes adhered to these values.

## Key questions

These were questions key partners wanted to ensure were addressed during the process. They were grouped into four areas:

1. What is the scope of what is being considered?
2. What is the role of the various systems involved in youth justice, including the role of the Court?
3. What, if any, concerns are there tied to cost and effectiveness that will impact any proposed changes?
4. How will we define success?

CBHJ team members reviewed these questions regularly to ensure they were being addressed in the process. Questions that were unable to be addressed in the process were considered in the evaluation.

## Visual map of progress

This map visually outlined how youth come into the youth justice system, what institutions or systems engage them along the way, and the various pathways they might take prior to termination.

## Strengths and challenges

Key partners identified the strengths of the current Court and County systems and the challenges that each is facing.

## Current recidivism outcomes

This was essential to understand as a baseline measure against which to assess the impact of the proposed changes.

## Research evidence

Before considering any actions, key partners wanted to better understand adolescent brain development, critical features of evidence-based practice systems, and the most current evidence-based decision-making models.

**Early on, key partners worked to create the foundation for critical upcoming discussions.**



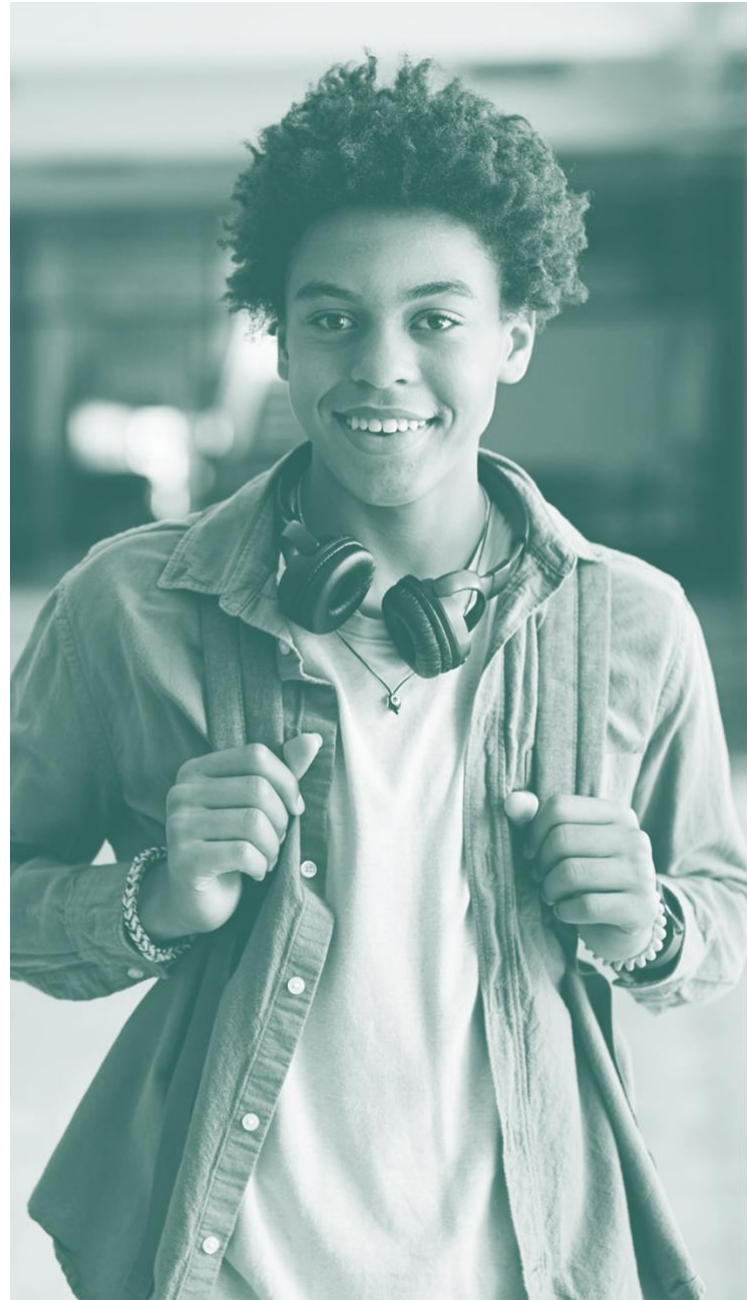


## Key values to drive change

Identifying key values to drive change was an essential first step in creating the foundation for upcoming discussions. Pairing the discussion about values with each key partner's introduction offered participants a chance to learn each other's unique point of view on the youth justice system. It also served as a doorway to trust among everyone at the table.

The group decided that any change needed to be grounded in the values listed below.

1. Be built on the **needs of the youth and family** and embody a holistic approach that is seamless for the youth and family, driven by the needs of the youth and family and not the providers, and based on need and not solely on cost considerations.
2. Incorporate the **voices** of youth and families whenever possible.
3. Offer a **systematic** approach to service delivery.
4. Offer **comprehensive, wraparound services** that are based on collaboration and partnerships.
5. Be **data driven**, using current **best practices** and include a **systematic review process** to assess outcomes and determine whether new approaches are needed.
6. Be **equitable, fair** and **accessible** to all.
7. Address the **stigma** associated with receiving mental health services.
8. Balance the **safety needs** of the child, their family and the community.
9. Lead to **empowerment** of the youth and family and ensure that the youth justice system is not the long-term plan.
10. Reduce **recidivism** and disrupt the **pipeline to the adult system**.





## Step 2: Determining the change process

While a diverse group of key partners had been convened to help the Court address a critical issue, no parameters had been set as to the scope of the change except that it be fiscally viable. A presentation by the CBHJ team about evidence-based practices and current research on adolescent development helped expand the conversation beyond financial restructuring and center it around **transformative changes that could improve youth outcomes**.

Both the Court and the County have a robust assessment system by which they can ascertain the **needs** of the youth. Wayne County, which holds the contract to provide these services, **responds** to these needs by offering a diverse range of services that can be tailored to meet the unique needs of each youth. What was missing was an evidence-based, validated tool that could assess the **risk** of the youth for re-offending. This tool, to be completed before pre-trial, could give judges and jurists accurate information by which they could determine the most appropriate placement for the youth. Below is a list of all of the changes.

### Use a risk assessment tool

The Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI) risk assessment tool will be provided at the front end of the process, after a petition has been filed but before adjudication in order to determine recidivism risk and service needs. The GAIN-SS substance abuse screener will also be used.

### Provide a warm hand-off for services

Prior to adjudication, the clinic will provide a warm handoff for youth and family to referrals that can address needs identified in the YASI and GAIN-SS. In addition to helping the youth, this can also inform case processing and defense strategies.

### Restructure the clinic

The Court's Clinic for Child Study will be restructured to become the entity that completes these front-end assessments.

### Engage defense earlier

Assigning defense counsel to qualifying youth earlier in the court process, ideally when the petition is filed, and providing them with the results of the YASI and the GAIN-SS will help identify youth eligible for diversion as well as help counsel engage in a more vigorous defense of youth going through the Court process.

### Create a dispositional matrix

Tied to the risk assessment tool, a dispositional matrix offers guidelines for judges and jurists on security levels and placement decisions. Akin to sentencing guidelines, the dispositional matrix draws its recommendations from historical evidence and thereby helps reduce unconscious bias in decision making.

### Create a shared definition of recidivism

This was needed to assess the impact of the system changes on improve outcomes for youth.

A presentation about evidence-based practices and research on adolescents helped center the conversation around transformative changes to improve youth outcomes.



## Step 3: Getting to implementation

Over several months, key partners took steps toward implementing these changes by the launch date of June 22, 2020. While originally set for January 1, budgetary factors plus the impact of the pandemic pushed the launch date forward six months. The CBHJ team moved the committee through the following activities so the project could launch by the new deadline.

### Create a new process map

Committee members developed a new process map to reflect the implementation of the YASI and earlier engagement of defense. This allowed key partners one final look at the overall process changes as well as the chance to examine the details at each point to ensure everything was integrated.

### Review all assessments

Court and County partners created a list of all assessments given to youth to ensure that there was no duplication with the YASI. This process also helped key partners determine when or whether a second YASI would be implemented.

### Change processes

Prior to adjudication, the clinic will provide a warm handoff for youth and family to referrals that can address needs identified in the YASI and GAIN-SS. In addition to helping the youth, this can also inform case processing and defense strategies.

### Develop a timeline

Once all key tasks, time frames and persons responsible were identified, CBHJ team members created a GANTT chart to help the Court's implementation team stay on top of tasks and move forward towards implementation.

### Create a communication plan

In addition to those around the table, there were multiple key partners in the community who were invested in the change and who needed to be kept informed of its implementation and outcomes. A communication plan was put together that listed key informants, messages tailored to each group, and a time frame for communication.

**Given the cost of youth justice programming and the high cost of confinement of youth offenders, it benefits youth, the Court and youth justice agencies to sort youth offenders by risk, divert low risk offenders away from the youth justice system as often as possible, and focus services on high-risk offenders.**



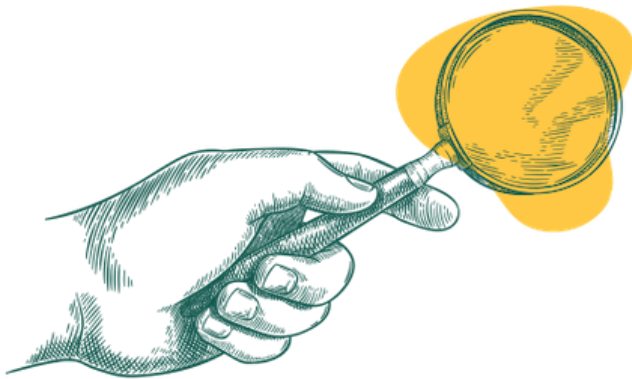




## Step 4: Evaluating the results

From the beginning, the committee agreed that regardless of the changes that were made, a robust evaluation was needed to determine whether the desired goals of the systems changes were met, i.e., the number of youth diverted increased and youth recidivism was reduced.

To prepare for this evaluation, CBHJ team members helped stakeholders create four documents that would support the development of the evaluation design. The process of creating these documents also helped stakeholders articulate the basis behind why the proposed systems changes will positively impact youth and their families and lead to the desired outcomes.



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### List of hypotheses

Throughout the process, key partners articulated their thinking around the key issues that the changes were going to address. To formalize their thinking in order to launch the development of an evaluation framework, the CBHJ team used an “if-then” process. This allowed key partners to state their understanding of the proposed changes from their unique point of view and to express the desired changes they believe would happen. This list served as the foundation for the following three evaluation documents.

### Logic model

A logic model ties the activities to the outcomes. Building on the theory of change, key partners created a logic model that detailed the anticipated short, medium and long-term outcomes of the project. This document also helped frame the scope and design of the evaluation.

### Data code book

The CBHJ team helped key partners put together a data code book that detailed all of the data to be captured for evaluation purposes. The code book also identified who has the data and how it is collected. This ensures that the project has the correct data needed to evaluate the changes and report on the agreed-upon outcomes.

### Theory of change chart

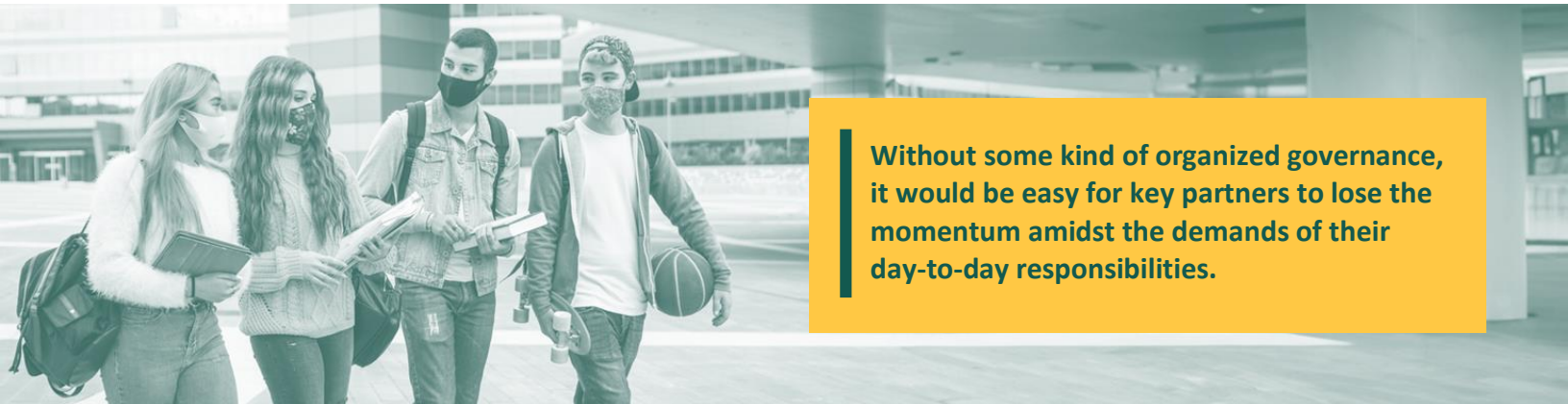
A theory of change articulates underlying assumptions behind proposed changes. It explains why a particular change or intervention will cause something else to happen. To create their theory of change chart, key partners started with the goal of the systems reform and then articulated how all the various changes would lead to that goal.



## Step 5: Ensuring fidelity and sustainability

Implementing change that impacts multiple systems can be challenging, as decision-making criteria in one of the systems (e.g., the prosecutor's office) could contradict that of one of the other systems (e.g., the court). A group of key partners needs to be charged with paying attention to these details to ensure that they do not inadvertently alter, slow down or defeat the entire change. So too with sustaining the change. Key partners need to serve as champions for the change, help hold the process to its mission and remove barriers that inevitably emerge.

The CBHJ recommended – and key partners concurred – that the project utilize a governance model organized around three roles: high-level governance; operational/program governance; and project management. Without some kind of organized governance, it would be easy for key partners to lose the momentum amidst the demands of their day-to-day responsibilities. Below is the structure that key partners finalized.



**Without some kind of organized governance, it would be easy for key partners to lose the momentum amidst the demands of their day-to-day responsibilities.**

### Governance committee

This committee, comprised of the leadership of the court and the county plus high-level finance and data representation, the prosecutor, and defense attorneys, provides strategic oversight to the project and ensures that the project is on track, on budget and holds to its purpose and scope. Members also remove barriers to the project that the steering team is unable to resolve.

### Steering team

This team engages in tactical thinking about the project, ensuring that the operational details are in place so staff can successfully implement the project. All evaluation reports come first to this group before going to the Governance Committee. Members mirror the Governance Committee and are those empowered to consider and resolve operational details.

### Various work groups

Various work groups get created as needed to navigate specific details or challenges to the project such as training, finance, data and information technology, communications and court processes. For Year 1, data and defense work groups were established.

### Implementation and evaluation team

This team, comprised of court and CBHJ team members, is charged with addressing strategic issues around processes tied to the implementation and evaluation of the project that emerge. This group helps identify solutions to any challenges. They also are the first to review evaluation results before being sent to the steering team and the governance committee.



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