

RESEARCH REPORT

Youth Justice Reform in Milwaukee

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

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Youth Justice Reform in Milwaukee: Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Community supervision, typically in the form of probation, plays a central role in the juvenile legal system. The majority of young people who encounter the legal system and are adjudicated delinquent are placed on probation (Puzzanchera and Hockenberry 2021). In 2019, the most recent year for which data are available, half of all juvenile cases sanctioned in court—nearly 250,000¹—resulted in probation. Because of this, reforming probation could transform how youth justice is administered. Over the past couple of decades, states and localities across the country have been revising probation policies and practices to align with best practice and research on adolescent development (Harvell et al. 2018). This report highlights efforts in one of those jurisdictions: Milwaukee County, Wisconsin.

Children, Youth and Family Services (CYFS),² which is under the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services, oversees the children's disability programs of Birth to Three, Children's Long Term Support Waiver and Children's Community Options, as well as the youth probation and detention center. This report focuses solely on the youth justice component of the service area as it relates to youth justice reform efforts. CYFS has spent the past decade working to improve probation practices and services for the young people and families it serves. Over that period, it has fundamentally changed its approach to supervision, redefined staff roles and responsibilities, and adopted a new trauma-informed, developmentally responsive model, Growth-Focused Case Management, to guide policy and practice.³ Implementing changes of that magnitude has not been quick or easy and remains a work in progress. Yet CYFS leaders and staff have learned much from the process, and Milwaukee County provides a helpful case study of youth justice reform in action.

Drawing on interviews with 20 local stakeholders and our experiences providing technical assistance to CYFS leaders over more than two years, this report summarizes lessons from Milwaukee County's reform efforts, including factors that have supported and hindered progress (box 1 provides additional information on our methodology). We provide a brief overview of how youth justice is structured in Milwaukee County and the changes CYFS has made over the past decade, summarize key lessons, and document CYFS' priorities as the county continues to improve youth justice services.

BOX 1

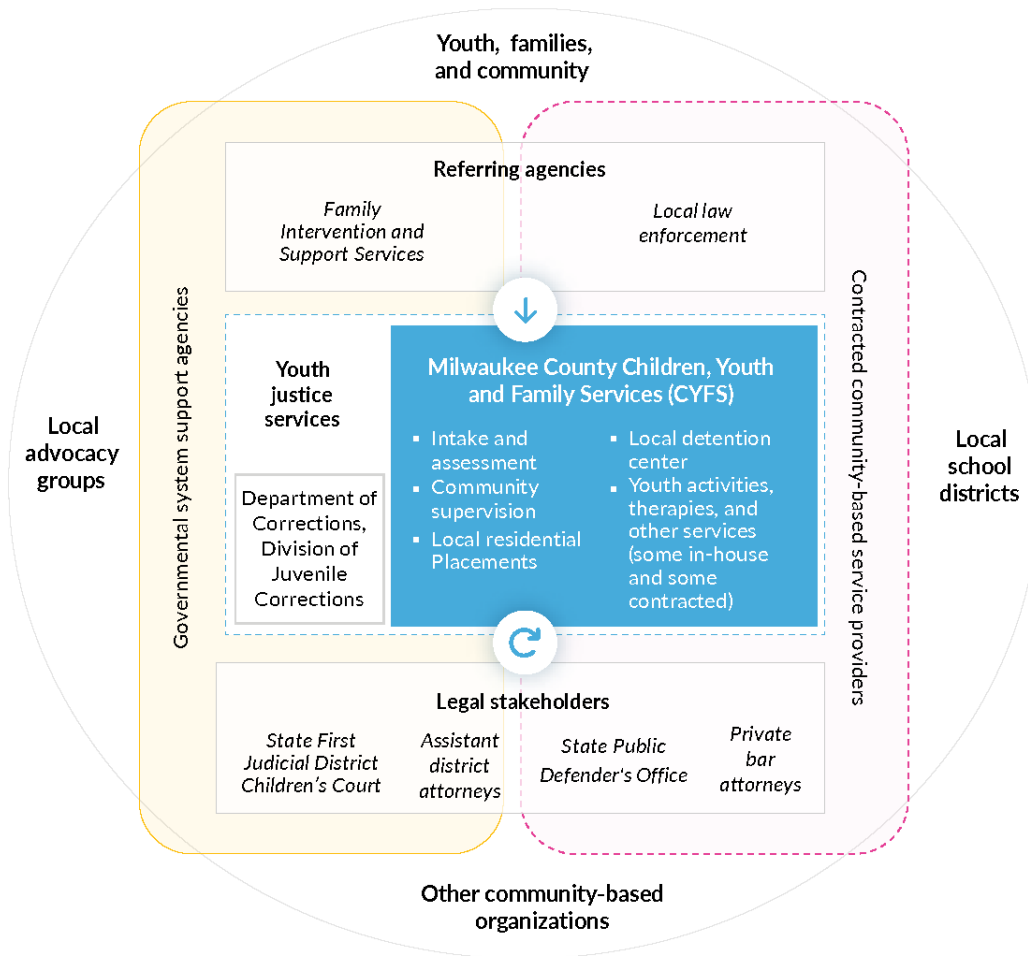
Methodology

Between December 2020 and September 2022, the authors of this report provided intensive technical assistance to Milwaukee County CYFS to support implementation of research-informed practices in supervision. Urban team members helped structure and attended several weekly leadership meetings; supported ongoing strategic planning and organizational change efforts; helped clarify and define staff roles and responsibilities; and advised on program development, implementation, and performance measurement. The Urban team also conducted individual interviews with 20 local stakeholders in the summer of 2022, including 10 CYFS leaders, 3 supervisory-level human service workers, and 3 external partners (2 service providers that support justice-involved youth and 1 local justice reform advocate), to explore their perceptions of reform efforts, challenges, and accomplishments. This report's findings synthesize takeaways from those interviews and the research team's observations working with the CYFS leadership team.

Youth Justice in Milwaukee: A System Snapshot and Brief History of Reform

The juvenile legal system in Wisconsin is county based, meaning that in Milwaukee County, local agencies oversee most primary functions and set policy and practice for the administration of youth justice. Key youth justice stakeholders and partners in the county are outlined below (figure 1; see additional details about specific organizations and agencies in appendix A). They include referring agencies, legal stakeholders, state and local agencies that oversee youth justice, state and local system support services, community support services, and community stakeholders.

FIGURE 1
Milwaukee County Youth Justice Process and Core Stakeholders



Milwaukee County Children, Youth and Family Services (CYFS) Youth Justice Services (functions shown in blue inner box) interacts with and is shaped by the community it serves (gray circle where the youth and families live, school districts operate, local advocacy groups seek to shape services, and other community members and service providers live and operate).

Activities performed within CYFS and those contracted to community-based service providers or performed by other governmental support agencies work jointly together (shown by the dotted purple outline and yellow shaded box) to meet the needs of youth who have been referred to the youth justice system and are required to participate in its services.

Those community-based contracted providers change over time to reflect the diversity of young people's and families' diverse needs and emerging evidence about how to best assure safety while meeting those needs.

Youth enter the system through a referring agency operating at the state, county, or city level. The State First Judicial District Children's Court determines the young person's path after hearing from CYFS, the county district attorney, and the person representing the young person (a state public defender or private bar defense attorney). Youth Justice Services and the legal stakeholders typically interact at multiple points in a young person's journey (as shown by the cyclical arrows).

Source: Urban Institute.

An Overview of Children, Youth and Family Services

In Milwaukee County, CYFS is the primary youth justice agency overseeing court intake, detention, local placement, and community supervision of young people who encounter Children’s Court. It also oversees all of the county’s disability programs for young people. It manages both the Vel R. Phillips Youth & Family Justice Center (the county’s youth detention center), which holds all detained youth in Milwaukee County as well as those placed locally after disposition, and the intake and ongoing community supervision casework units (see appendix B for an overview of the agency). After falling in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, youth justice referrals increased significantly in 2021: that year, CYFS processed 1,552 detention referrals and supervised 1,561 different young people, representing a 25 percent increase in referrals and a 54 percent increase in the number of young people on community supervision compared with 2019. In 2022, young people were staying in the detention center for 46 days on average, almost twice as long as the 2019 average (22.5 days).⁴

A Brief History of CYFS Youth Justice Reform

CYFS is the agency that has led the youth justice reform efforts discussed in this report. Those reform efforts started in 2011 when CYFS began shifting from a law enforcement–driven probation model focused on surveillance and compliance to an approach intended to address the root causes of crime and other unwanted behavior. This was a fundamental shift in how the CYFS team thought about and served young people and their families. Research and experience indicated the young people referred to the court system were not “bad kids” who needed to be fixed—rather, they were, along with their families, struggling with complex needs that other systems had not addressed. It also became clear to CYFS that it needed to collaborate with young people and their families, who are the experts on their own lives and know what will motivate change in their own cases.

This paradigm shift involved significant changes to the language CYFS used to describe itself and its work, to its approach to supervision, and to its policies and procedures:

- **Regarding language**, CYFS changed its job titles to signal and reflect its changed approach, which centered youth and family needs. The title of staff doing the community supervision changed from “probation officer” to “human services worker.” The title of staff working with youth in the detention center changed from “juvenile correction officer” to “youth correction officer.”
- **Regarding its supervision approach**, CYFS built an individualized case planning model designed to promote long-term behavior change more effectively by meeting young people’s needs and addressing their risks. Though the approach later evolved into what is now known as Growth-

Focused Case Management, the earlier iteration was also rooted in research on effective community supervision practices and the risk-need-responsivity model. Similarly, CYFS trained youth correction officers to use isolation and restraint less and take a more trauma-informed approach focused on promoting better choices and positive behavior change in detention.

- **Regarding its policies and procedures**, whereas community supervision practices before reform varied significantly from worker to worker, the CYFS team standardized policies and protocols rooted in best practice to guide human services workers' tasks and responsibilities and built out a training program to equip staff with the skills required to implement the new model and support adoption of those new standards.

After this initial shift, CYFS leaders partnered with several national technical assistance organizations to focus targeted resources, time, and expertise on reform efforts (see appendix C for a summary of core initiatives). With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Columbia Justice Lab, the Georgetown Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, the Peabody Research Institute, the Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice, and the Urban Institute, CYFS has made progress and is continually improving its services and supports for young people and their families.

Lessons Learned in Milwaukee

Milwaukee County is still on its reform journey, but more than 10 years into its effort it has learned some hard and helpful lessons for others seeking to improve youth probation practices.

Having a Team Dedicated to Quality Management Provides Critical Infrastructure to Support Reform

CYFS' quality team has built internal capacity to integrate innovations and infuse continuous quality improvement principles throughout all agency functions, including programming and contracting, staff performance measurement, and policy and practice development. The agency leveraged an initial federal grant investment in a quality assurance specialist to build an entire quality team over the past decade that has grown to include a management-level strategy coordinator, a training and staff development specialist, and three quality assurance specialists.⁵ This team functions differently from many others in Milwaukee County that focus primarily on compliance with grant requirements.

The CYFS quality team's core functions include

- developing policies and procedures;

- implementing, refining, and sustaining training, coaching, and performance measurement infrastructure for staff development;
- supporting the development of measures that assess performance and outcomes of contracted service providers;
- creating tools to support uptake and implementation of new policies and practices; and
- leading the agency's "Plan-Do-Study-Act" cycle for all new innovations.

An example of this team's efforts has been developing, testing, and improving training modules for onboarding new staff and providing refresher courses for all team members to ensure they implement the agency's case management model with fidelity to its design. It has also built new infrastructure to improve how CYFS recruits, engages with, and measures the performance of CYFS' contracted community-based service providers. It has also supported those providers and developed an annual continuous quality improvement cycle that involves quarterly meetings, collaborative goal setting, education, and supportive accountability. To get the providers to buy in to the accountability structures and commit to outcomes, it also cultivated change champions among the providers called provider ambassadors who were engaged in the development of the continuous quality improvement cycle and cocreated the tool for evaluating providers.

Implementation Science Offers a Helpful Framework for Promoting Change

Milwaukee County has found implementation science critical in implementing changes to youth justice programming and policies (resources on implementation science resources for youth justice practitioners are provided in box 2). The formal concept of implementation science was introduced to CYFS by an external partner (the Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice) but it reinforced concepts and approaches the agency's quality team was already using and applying. Milwaukee County learned the importance of implementation science in part by trying to implement changes without drawing on evidence of what works to promote effective uptake. For example, when CYFS first tried to implement consistent use of a standardized risk and needs assessment, it selected a tool, trained staff to use it, and created policy requiring staff to assess all young people and use results to guide case planning. But staff were slow to use that tool in case planning, which made implementation much longer than leaders had anticipated. Looking back, it was clear to agency leaders that those early efforts did not focus enough on supervisors, and without sufficient training, they were not equipped to communicate policy and practice changes to staff, support staff in implementing those changes, and hold them accountable for implementing them. If leaders had relied on implementation

science, they would have known that training for frontline workers was not sufficient and that they needed to build coaching infrastructure to translate policy changes into frontline practice changes. Also, staff we interviewed noted that the formal, evidence-based implementation science framework made an impact because it secured critical buy-in for reform from external colleagues and legal stakeholders.

BOX 2

Implementation Science Resources for Youth Justice Practitioners

The Active Implementation Research Network, a leading organization in the applied research field, defines implementation science as “the study of factors that influence the full and effective use of innovations in practice.”^a In short, over the past several decades, the field has learned a lot about how to effectively implement evidence-based and research-informed policies and programs. Research has revealed what factors drive effective implementation (including staff competencies, organizational factors, and leadership factors); that there are four stages of change (exploration, installation, initial implementation, and full implementation); the need for designated implementation teams to guide change efforts; and how change evolves in cycles of continuous quality improvement. Milwaukee County has found this approach critical to its reform successes. For more information on applying implementation science in youth probation reform efforts, see the following resources:

- **The Active Implementation Research Network website:** <https://www.activeimplementation.org/>.
- **Urban’s 2019 report *Bridging Research and Practice: A Handbook for Implementing Research-Informed Practices in Juvenile Probation*:** <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/bridging-research-and-practice-handbook-implementing-research-informed-practices-juvenile-probation>.
- **The Center for Advancing Correctional Excellence’s *Implementation Science Toolkit: Equipping Justice Agencies with the Tools to Facilitate the Change Process*:** https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Implementation-Science_Toolkit_Taxman.pdf.

Sources: ^a Dean L. Fixsen, Karen A. Blase, Sandra F. Naoom, and Frances Wallace, “Core Implementation Components,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 19, no. 5 (May 2009): 531–40.

Effective Leadership Is Essential

Several interviewees flagged that strong leadership was critical to the planning and implementation of reforms. Like most jurisdictions across the country, Milwaukee County’s juvenile legal system is characterized by frequent leadership changes at the county and contracted agency levels. Each new county executive, head of the Department of Health and Human Services, and administrator for Children,

Youth and Family Services (i.e., the probation director) has the potential to usher in a new vision and priorities for CYFS and the county more broadly. Given youth justice is a comparatively small part of the broader health and human services ecosystem and the broader Milwaukee County leaders do not necessarily come in with expertise in justice, each change requires agency staff to develop new relationships, build trust, and educate new leaders on Milwaukee County’s juvenile legal system and vision (box 3 provides an overview of characteristics of strong youth justice reform leaders that interviewees provided). Changes within the county can also present challenges in communication, collaboration, and cocreation with long-standing community partners. Interviewees noted that it can be challenging for community partners to quickly adapt their own work plans to changing leadership priorities and that partners need time and clear direction when changes occur.

BOX 3

Characteristics of Strong Youth Justice Reform Leaders

Interviewees noted how critical strong leaders are to effectively advancing a reform agenda and managing a change effort. They highlighted several characteristics of strong justice reform leaders. A strong leader does the following:

- **Communicates and educates effectively.** They can articulate a vision, plan consistently and clearly, and educate many different stakeholders about the “why” of reform with targeted messaging based on each audience.
- **Brings a growth mindset and self-awareness to the work.** They are self-aware, open to feedback and constructive criticism, and aim to become stronger leaders and inspire colleagues throughout their organization to grow professionally and improve their work.
- **Supports implementation science principles.** A strong leader understands the principles of effective implementation and applies effective strategies to every aspect of the work.
- **Understands racism as a foundation of the juvenile legal system.** In a state like Wisconsin where young African Americans are 11 times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts,^a and in a city like Milwaukee where African American youth make up 70 percent of all incarcerated youth,^b a strong leader must understand critical race theory and why it is relevant to the modern-day administration of justice. They must also understand that the juvenile legal system was designed with racist intent after the abolition of slavery.

Sources: ^a Joshua Rovner, “Black Disparities in Youth Incarceration,” Sentencing Project, July 15, 2021, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/black-disparities-in-youth-incarceration/>.

^b Data provided by CYFS.

Investing in Staff Development and Organizational Infrastructure and Systems Is Vital to Long-Term Success and Sustainability

Milwaukee County learned early on that implementing changes of the scope and scale needed in its youth justice reform journey required significant investments in recruiting and training staff and building organizational infrastructure and systems. Interviewees noted that CYFS leaders intentionally built a leadership team to advance change. They sought a team of people with government and nonprofit experience and diverse expertise in child and family service systems (including child welfare and mental health) and who would all bring connections, opportunities, and ideas. One former CYFS leader said assembling the team and watching the new leaders' growth and development and the transformation it supported was the most rewarding part of the job.

Even with additional investments in staffing and infrastructure, however, staff turnover remains a challenge in Milwaukee County and staffing issues have been particularly challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. CYFS faced significant staff turnover before the pandemic and resignations increased significantly after it began as the workforce had to start working remotely. Interviewees shared that it has been challenging to accomplish basic job functions, much less develop and pilot new ideas without additional staff and resources. Since the onset of the pandemic, staff have felt like they are in a surge that never stops, and addressing this is an ongoing challenge for CYFS leaders.

In addition, CYFS has learned lessons about the critical importance of data systems and infrastructure largely because of what it does *not* have. Though the agency has implemented new systems over the past decade, it still lacks a data system adequate for the data-driven decisionmaking it aims to actualize. It is hard to overstate the impact of this on operations. For example, not having sufficient data systems and infrastructure means

- workers lack a system that supports effective case management or that they can use to hold contracted service providers accountable for providing trauma-informed, effective services;
- managers lack a system for effectively measuring staff performance;
- leaders lack a system for reporting on the impact of programs, policies, and other activities in a timely and accurate manner; and
- there are no public-facing dashboards or other tools for improving transparency and documenting impact.

CYFS is currently piloting eWISACWIS, the system used by youth justice practitioners in other Wisconsin counties as well as the state's child welfare agency to manage cases, and is participating in a

multiyear process to develop a new customized platform through Netsmart. But in the meantime, staff must create workarounds to get staff to, as one interviewee put it, “know the why, treasure what’s measured, and bring this stuff to life.” For instance, quality assurance specialists have spent tedious hours pulling case file information from multiple data systems to analyze uptake and outcomes of new programs, and frontline workers have individually developed trackers for key case management functions like tracking upcoming court dates, timelines for reassessing young people’s risk and needs, and incentives and sanctions provided in specific cases.

Building Internal Support and Buy-In for Reform Is Crucial

Consistent with implementation science research, staff at all levels frequently say internal and external resistance to change is one of the greatest challenges to reform efforts. Shifting CYFS’ approach to supervision from one based on law enforcement to one based on a case management model was a change of great magnitude. Roles, responsibilities, and expectations changed for staff at every level, and shifting from being compliance officers to coaches/mentors was not easy or doable for everyone. Also, early on, many staff were concerned the strengths-based, case management model excused accountability for wrongdoing. Before reform, individual workers had much more flexibility to develop their own practices and manage their work. With the new continuous quality improvement approach, they faced much more accountability and staff who fell behind faced consequences, which hurt morale. In addition, the new case management model required different and significantly more work. It takes much more time to build relationships with young people and their families, meet them in their communities, coordinate with other agencies and community partners, and individualize strategies to address the root causes of negative behaviors and promote positive youth development than it does to check in with them in the office a couple times a month and make sure they do not violate the court-ordered terms of their supervision.

The paradigm shift in probation took significant planning, work, and trial and error. Building internal buy-in was critical, and interviewees flagged the following as particularly important for doing so.

NATURAL ATTRITION

Not everyone at CYFS fit with its new model. In the early years of its reform effort, several staff members who did not support the new approach or could not meet their new job requirements retired, got new jobs, and/or were coached out. As hard as it is to see staff move on, that natural attrition that typically occurs in change efforts of this magnitude created space for a new collective culture and vision for the agency and its administration of supervision, services, and supports for young people and their

families. Further, new staff and leaders from other disciplines brought insights from those disciplines and an openness to input and ideas because they were new to youth justice.

STRONG MESSAGING ABOUT THE “WHY”

Interviewees pointed to the importance of clear messaging about the reasons for new policies and practices. Several said this was something that evolved and improved. For example, early on, leaders could not clearly articulate why change was needed and how CYFS’ new approach would better meet the needs of the community, young people, and families it serves. Over time, agency leaders have honed their messaging.

EARLY AND FREQUENT STAFF ENGAGEMENT

Another hard lesson learned in Milwaukee County was that top-down efforts are often met with resistance. CYFS leaders quickly learned that engaging staff at all levels early and often was critical to (1) developing effective policies and practices and (2) getting staff to buy in to those policies and practices, implement them, and hold other staff accountable to them. One interviewee noted that things got better, “once we stopped doing things *to* staff and started doing things *with* them.” For example, whereas early policies were simply drafted by leaders and handed down, new policies are now drafted, shared with frontline workers for feedback, and revised as needed before they are rolled out. Today, the CYFS team includes staff in developing new policies, programs, and initiatives to increase the likelihood they will make sense, will produce their intended outcomes, and are supported by the workers who will be implementing them.

IMPROVEMENTS TO QUALITY OF WORK LIFE

Because of the magnitude of the change, the additional work leaders were asking frontline staff to take on, and the general growing pains that accompany those, leaders sought ways to garner support by improving “perks” and the quality of work life. Some interviewees flagged this had a big impact on work culture. For example, early in the reform effort, agency leaders streamlined the vacation approval process by enabling supervisors to sign off on requests, acquired new furniture and allowed staff to paint their offices, and increased access to office supplies. These were small gestures but for some they went a long way toward building a positive culture and garnering support for reform work.

Developing Tailored, Targeted, and Effective Messages about Reform Is Critical to Growing and Leveraging External Legal Partnerships

Building relationships with and getting support from external partners for any major reform effort is a huge undertaking, particularly in the juvenile legal system, which is strategically and purposefully designed to create checks and balances. This continues to be a challenge in Milwaukee County. The shift from a law enforcement model to a social work-informed case management approach fundamentally changed the dynamics between key court stakeholders, particularly between CYFS and the district attorney's office and, to some extent, the judiciary. Before reform, CYFS primarily focused on monitoring court orders to advance public safety. After beginning the reform, however, CYFS staff brought a different perspective to the table—one focused on holding young people accountable but also helping them and their families change the behaviors that led to their legal system involvement. Centering young people and families required making recommendations to the court that might conflict with those of the prosecutors and challenge judicial understandings of how to hold young people accountable and change their behavior.

Through trial and error, CYFS has learned the critical importance of effectively educating court stakeholders and bringing them on board with youth justice reform efforts in Milwaukee County. This is an ongoing process as judges cycle in and out of Children's Court every few years and district attorneys are appointed during each political cycle (meaning assistant district attorneys also transfer in and out of Children's Court). Interviewees noted that early in the reform efforts, opportunities to get input from legal partners and understand their perspectives, concerns, and goals were missed. CYFS engaged with them, but its messages were confusing because they did not focus on what was important to the stakeholders or how CYFS would help them achieve their goals. After many engagements that did not improve relationships or understanding, CYFS realized that crafting tailored, effective messages about reform efforts was perhaps the most important way to build knowledge and trust and improve relationships. It also realized that in some cases, as one staff member said, "our legal stakeholders are partners in justice; they are not necessarily allies in reform."

Despite these challenges with other legal partners, CYFS has had success building relationships and partnering with law enforcement agencies in Milwaukee County. Several years ago, cross-agency meetings in the county surfaced challenges between probation and law enforcement owing to a lack of understanding between the two agencies. To bridge that divide, CYFS launched an intensive education effort with law enforcement agencies about the detention risk assessment instrument and how detention decisions were being made. They designed and hosted cross-training sessions in which law enforcement officers spent a full day with human services workers in probation and then CYFS leaders

spent a full day with law enforcement. This helped staff on each side better understand the other's roles and responsibilities, develop relationships, and build trust. CYFS also created a community liaison position and hired someone for the role who had worked with the Milwaukee Police Department for more than 10 years. Bringing in someone with a law enforcement background further strengthened trust and embedded someone who deeply understood law enforcement functions in the probation agency.

Centering Community Is Essential

One of the most significant changes in Milwaukee County's probation approach involved understanding that growth and desistance from offending behavior happens at home, in the community, and that ideally young people will be at home with their families accessing culturally responsive and community-based services, supports, and opportunities. Over the past several years, CYFS has become intentional about partnering with the community members most impacted by the legal system and supporting community-driven and community-based solutions. The agency is leveraging and creating opportunities to bring people together and create space for all interested partners to work together to meet the diverse needs of the people they serve, break down silos organizations are working in, and support collaboration to reduce competition for limited funding. This work is not easy, there is trust to build between CYFS and community-based agencies and stakeholders, and the county has a long way to go to build and sustain the full continuum of community-based care and opportunity it envisions for all young people and their families. But programming such as credible messenger mentoring (box 4) is demonstrating the success of the agency's efforts.

One interviewee described this effort [the credible messenger program] as one of CYFS' greatest accomplishments—one that has brought together several grassroots agencies as a united powerhouse serving young people, meeting their needs, mediating conflict, decreasing violence, and connecting young people to prosocial people and resources in their communities.

BOX 4

Credible Messenger Mentors in Milwaukee County

Milwaukee County recently funded and launched a credible messenger mentoring program to provide intensive support, coaching, and mentoring for young people involved—or at risk of becoming involved—with the legal system. CYFS announced the program in 2020 and invited all interested community-based organizations to attend a free training about the opportunity. The agency sought and received approval from the County Board of Supervisors to change a county ordinance prohibiting people with criminal histories from working for the county to allow those with lived experiences to serve as mentors. Eleven organizations completed that training, each of which was already engaged in mentoring in some way. This collaboration helped organizations be more transparent about their work, show respect for different perspectives and approaches, and work together to address the needs of young people in the community. Five organizations were selected to receive funding for the initiative and continue to work together to serve young people. Some of those organizations even collaborate on individual cases. One interviewee described this effort as one of CYFS' greatest accomplishments—one that brought together several grassroots agencies as a united powerhouse serving young people, meeting their needs, mediating conflict, decreasing violence, and connecting young people to prosocial people and resources in their communities. Early evaluation of the program is promising and there are plans to expand it by increasing funding to support more mentors and ongoing training and recruitment to grow the program.

Milwaukee County's youth justice reform journey has also illuminated how evidence-based approaches are important but adaptations are needed to meet communities' needs. CYFS leaders value research and evidence, and their first step is to look for evidence of effective strategies. But they have learned that most evidence-informed strategies have not been tested with people like their youth in a community like theirs. For example, dialectical behavior therapy is gaining traction across the country as an effective treatment modality for young people in residential treatment facilities (Waitz et al. 2021) and is the core programming model for young people held in a Milwaukee County residential treatment center. Originally developed for women with borderline personality disorder who were experiencing suicidal thoughts,⁶ dialectical behavior therapy required some modifications to meet the needs of youth incarcerated in Milwaukee County, most of whom are young Black men. The research supporting most evidence-based practices is drawn from studies of primarily white participants and, as a result, many gold standard programs are not culturally responsive. The county is working now to develop a new program that will include antiracist modifications to ensure core programming meets the needs of young people in Milwaukee.

Expanding Funding Structures Can Support Transformative Change

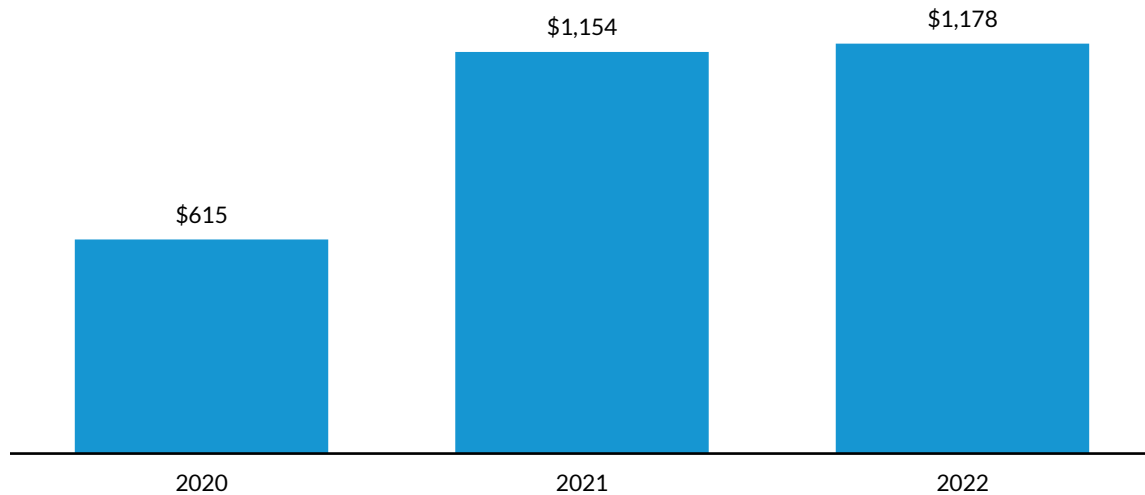
Funding structures and contracting requirements are another barrier Milwaukee County has faced in shifting to a more community-centered probation approach. Wisconsin's youth justice funding system is unique and Milwaukee's experience over the past couple of years has shown that it needs an overhaul. Though the state's funding model was held up as progressive and innovative 25 years ago, it has not evolved with the times and now provides a disincentive to progress (Butts and Evans 2011). Launched in 1981, the state's Youth Aids program required counties to pay for state-level placements and provided financial support for local programming and placements to incentivize localities to decrease out-of-home placements and increase community-based supports and services (Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau 1999). The innovative funding structure is credited with significantly reducing the number of state commitments through the 1990s (Tyler, Zeidenberg, and Lotke 2006).

Those state-level reform efforts have continued and Wisconsin is actively working to close its remaining youth correctional facilities, the Lincoln Hills (for boys) and Copper Lake (for girls) schools. To cover operational costs as fewer young people were ordered to corrections, the Department of Corrections proposed and lawmakers approved an 88 percent increase in the daily cost of a bed at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake between 2020 and 2021, and that cost increased again in 2022, which has exhausted Milwaukee County's youth justice budget (see figure 2 below for daily rates by year since 2020). In 2022, it cost **\$1,178 per day—\$429,970 per year**—to house one young person at the Lincoln Hills or Copper Lake schools. Increasing the price of prison beds is a powerful incentive for releasing young people who are in those facilities for minor offenses when there are safe, community-based alternatives for holding them accountable and meeting their needs. Today, most young people in the deep end of the system have been charged with serious and violent offenses and viable alternatives are limited. Milwaukee County is spending a disproportionate amount of its youth justice resources to support the handful of young people at Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake and Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center (a secure mental health treatment facility), severely limiting the money available to support community-based alternatives, services, supports, and opportunities that young people desperately need.

In 2022, it cost \$1,178 per day—\$429,970 per year—to house one young person at the Lincoln Hills or Copper Lake schools.

FIGURE 2

The Daily Cost of a Youth Correctional Bed at Wisconsin’s Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake Schools Almost Doubled between 2020 and 2022



Source: *Juvenile Statutory Daily Rates, Serious Juvenile Offenders, and Contract Beds (Corrections -- Juvenile Corrections)*, paper no. 254 (Madison: Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, Joint Committee on Finance Budget Summary, 2019).

In addition, Milwaukee County’s contracting requirements make it difficult to award contracts to smaller community-based organizations. By design, funding from local governments is challenging to apply for and requires grantees to regularly report detailed information on how they use it and outcomes. But some of the most innovative and effective youth justice work is being done at the community level by individuals or small organizations working with tens (not hundreds) of young people and families at a time. These individuals and small organizations lack the capacity larger organizations have to write successful proposals, meet grant requirements, and report on performance and outcomes.

If you are going to work with grassroots organizations, you have to make it attainable for them to succeed. –Community partner in Milwaukee County

Performance-based contracting models that base payment on specific outcomes are particularly challenging for smaller organizations, which cannot survive results-based performance models in a

system where so much is outside an organization's control. One community partner articulated that breaking down barriers to funding for small, grassroots, community-based organizations is a fundamental challenge for Milwaukee County and one that must be addressed: "If you are going to work with grassroots organizations, you have to make it attainable for them to succeed."

Recently, with support from Department of Health and Human Services leadership, CYFS has invested in strategies to break down funding barriers and create sustainable funding streams that can support local, grassroots organizations. For example, with funding from the Public Welfare Foundation, the agency has implemented participatory budgeting in partnership with the Milwaukee Turners⁷ (a local, nonprofit, charitable group working to advance social justice in Milwaukee County) to allocate up to \$400,000 to grassroots organizations working with youth and families in communities disproportionately impacted by the legal system. The grant opportunity draws on community input from seven public forums held with youth, activists, leaders, and justice-impacted families and two forums with youth currently incarcerated in the county's juvenile detention centers and was thoughtfully crafted to fund programs that "create innovative solutions to prevent young people from being impacted by Wisconsin's criminal legal system."⁸

Milwaukee Turners and the Greater Milwaukee Foundation will administer and distribute the grant funds, which can be used more flexibly than most of the county's previous youth justice grants. Those organizations are leveraging their expansive network of community partners to support allocation of funds from the County to smaller, grassroots organizations, which often face barriers to accessing government funding. Priority is given to proposals that support Black, brown, immigrant, or Indigenous young people who have been impacted by the legal system. The first two grants were awarded in fall 2022: [Paradigm Shyft](#) received \$200,000 to work with young Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color and young people arrested on less serious charges (particularly gun possession) to prevent further interaction with the criminal legal system. [Your Move MKE](#) received \$196,000 to operate programs designed to help break the cycles of poverty and trauma and build critical life skills, strength, and healing through hip hop and art. CYFS plans to direct additional funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to support participatory budget funding in future years.

Continuing the Youth Justice Reform Journey in Milwaukee

As Milwaukee County moves into its second decade of youth justice reform, it is a great time to reflect on and share lessons learned and the work that remains. CYFS' reform effort involves a continuous quality improvement approach that guarantees the work will never be done. Leaders plan to continue learning about emerging evidence, adapting that evidence to work in their community and with their youth, honing their messaging with internal and external stakeholders, and working toward a system that better supports youth, families, and their community. One leader's hope is

to continue building a [justice] system that is honest about its role in contributing to the current state and honest about what it can actually deliver; to decode vague words like accountability and point out the flaws in using recidivism as the sole metric of success; and to focus more on prevention, which means supporting the community-based programs that build children up before they get to our doors and local school systems where children spend most of their time.

They know from their journey so far that even if they were not trying to improve their services, they would still have to continuously adapt to changing political priorities, funding streams, staff, and community environments to maintain their work.

Appendix A. Youth Justice Stakeholders in Milwaukee County

Key stakeholders in Milwaukee County youth justice include the following.

Referring Agencies

Referring agencies are those that send young people to the court for assessment and processing. They include the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families' **Family Intervention Support and Services**, a voluntary, state-run program for Milwaukee County residents whose children are presenting problems such as truancy, fighting, drug/alcohol use, or running away. The program aims to help parents manage their children's behavior at home and prevent system involvement, including court intervention.

Referrals to the Milwaukee County Children's Court (see below) can come from any Milwaukee County municipality's local law enforcement, including the **Milwaukee Police Department**, operated by the City of Milwaukee, and the **Milwaukee County Sheriff's Office**, operated by Milwaukee County.

Legal Stakeholders

In Milwaukee County, all court matters for people younger than 17 are heard by a judge or court commissioner in **Wisconsin's First Judicial District Children's Court**. Per the district court's rule 146, judges serve four-year terms in one of four divisions (civil, felony and misdemeanor, family, and children's) before rotating to another one.⁹

Other legal stakeholders include the **Milwaukee County District Attorney's Office**, whose assistant district attorneys prosecute all cases (adult and youth) in Milwaukee County; defense attorneys from the Milwaukee Juvenile Office of the **Wisconsin State Public Defender's Office** who represent young people who cannot afford their own attorneys (these are state employees who work in a Milwaukee field office); and some **private bar attorneys**.

Youth Justice Services

Children, Youth and Family Services processes all referrals to the children's disability programs and the juvenile legal system and oversees community supervision for young people on probation as well as those in the community awaiting trial or returning home from incarceration. It also operates the county's local detention center, the Vel R. Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center, oversees residential placements for young people adjudicated delinquent and placed locally, and provides discharge planning for young people released from the detention center.

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections **Division of Juvenile Corrections** operates state-level secure correctional facilities (Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake Schools) for young people adjudicated delinquent and committed to the state. It also oversees aftercare for young people returning home from a state facility.

Governmental System Support Agencies

Through its **Adult Services and Children's Services** offices, the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services oversees several programs that support adults, children, and their families, including those who are justice involved. These include disability services such as Birth to Three (early intervention services); Children's Long-Term Services, which supports children with severe physical, developmental, or emotional disabilities; the Children's Community Options Program, which offers coordinated services for young people with severe disabilities through age 21; Youth Transition Services, which supports young people with severe disabilities as they transition out of high school and into adulthood; and the Disability Resource Center, which connects adults with community-based services and supports. They also include several behavioral health services for children and adults, including crisis response, community resource and treatment centers, and the Children's Community Mental Health Services and Wraparound Milwaukee program.¹⁰ Wraparound Milwaukee is a system of care designed to help build strong and healthy communities by enhancing children's and families' ability to meet life's challenges and to foster resiliency and hope for a better future. A portion of Wraparound Milwaukee is a specialized HMO; funding is also received via the Comprehensive Community Services Medicaid benefit, as well as pooled dollars from Child Welfare and CYFS-Youth Justice. Wraparound Milwaukee employs a strength-based and family-driven approach rooted in meeting underlying needs based on families identifying what supports they need to care for their child in their home and community.

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families' **Division of Milwaukee County Child Protective Services** is a state-level agency responsible for administering child welfare services in Milwaukee County.

Contracted Community-Based Youth and Family Service Providers

CYFS contracts with several **community-based service providers** that offer critical prevention and intervention services for young people supervised in the community and those in out-of-home placements. These include Running Rebels, Wisconsin Community Services, Youth Advocate Programs, and 414Life.

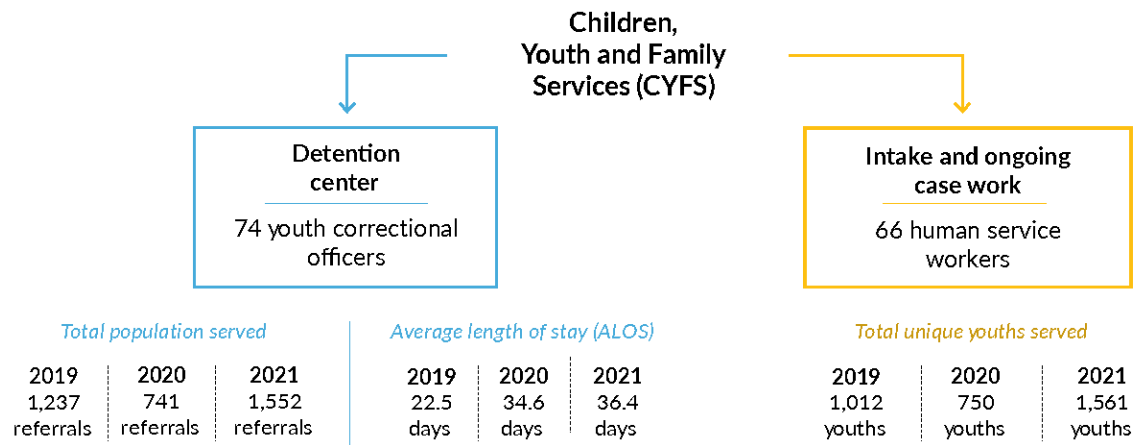
Other Community Stakeholders

Youth involved in the legal system and their **parents, caregivers, and other adult support figures** all play critical roles in the administration of youth justice in Milwaukee County. Other important stakeholders in the youth justice process include **other Milwaukee County community members; local advocacy groups** (such as **Urban Underground**) that provide critical insight into policy and program development around youth justice in the county; and **local school districts**, including **Milwaukee Public Schools** and the **Wauwatosa School District** (the latter's faculty provide and oversee educational services in the Vel R. Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center). In addition to contracted partners, several community-based organizations in Milwaukee County are working to build capacity in neighborhoods disproportionately impacted by crime and legal system involvement and support the administration of youth justice in the county in important ways.

Appendix B. Milwaukee County's Department of Health and Human Services' Children, Youth and Family Services

FIGURE A.1

Young People Detained by Law Enforcement and Supervised by Milwaukee County's Youth Justice Services, 2019–2021



Source: Data provided by Children, Youth and Family Services.

Note: The total population served under “Detention center” is based on referrals to the center in which youth can be counted more than once. In contrast, the numbers for “Intake and Ongoing Case Work” represent unique youths served.

Appendix C. Timeline of Major Youth Justice Reform Initiatives in Milwaukee County

- **2011-2013:**
 - » **Probation Department Paradigm Shift** – CYFS changes name, vision, and staff titles
 - » **Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI)** - With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, CYFS relaunches JDAI to support cross-agency efforts to reduce reliance on detention and promote broader system reforms. This was Milwaukee County’s second engagement with JDAI following an initial one in the 1990s.
 - » CYFS adopts and implements the **Youth Assessment Screening Instrument (YASI)** risk, needs, responsibility tool to guide case management and inform decision making at key points.
- **2013:** CYFS receives a **Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Initiative (JJRRI)** grant from the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to partner with the Peabody Research Institute at Vanderbilt University, the Georgetown University Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, and the Urban Institute to implement and study the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP). This was a pivotal change for CYFS because it gave the agency a tool for systematically assessing and improving the services and supports they contracted and provided for young people and their families and funded a quality specialist position to develop and implement a continuous quality improvement approach.
- **2015: Detention Risk Assessment Instrument (DRAI)** – In partnership with seven individual counties and the state of Wisconsin, CYFS developed and implemented a standardized DRAI to guide decision making about admissions to detention and to divert young people away from confinement whenever possible.
- **2016: Juvenile Program Management (JPM) Data System** Implemented – CYFS built and implemented a new temporary data system – JPM – to support data driven decision making in intake, detention, and supervision. That system also support implementation of a new dispositional matrix and effective response grid.

- **2017: Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice (RFKNRCJJ)** – Through their standardized probation system review, a technical assistance team from RFKNRCJJ conducted a comprehensive assessment of Milwaukee County’s probation policies and practices and worked with them to identify priority action steps to better align them with best practices.
- **2018: Growth Focused Case Management (GFCM)** – with support from RFKNRCJJ and the external consultant who developed the model, Milwaukee County adopted and implemented the research-informed GFCM to better address the underlying causes of unwanted behavior, support healthy development, and promote desistance from crime and negative behavior.¹¹
- **2019: Bridging Research and Practice in Probation** – in 2019, CYFS began partnering with a small team from the Urban Institute to analyze and improve organizational climate and strengthen their use of implementation science to better align policies and practices with principles of effective supervision.
- **2020: Zero Youth Corrections** – Beginning in 2020 and with support from the Public Welfare Foundation and the Columbia Justice Lab, CYFS created and hired a Zero Youth Corrections Project Manager to coordinate and expedite efforts to reduce reliance on detention and placement and expand the community-based continuum of services and supports available to young people and families in Milwaukee County.
- **2021: Milwaukee County Accountability Program Redesign** – Beginning in 2021, CYFS began to redesign in earnest their deep-end incarceration program to provide a local alternative to the state Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake Schools which are in the process of closing. The program draws on research-informed best practices and will provide a comprehensive dialectical behavior therapy--informed milieu built on five key components: imparting skill, acknowledging harm of racial injustice, promoting healing, adolescent growth and brain development, restorative practices, and continuous family inclusion.

Notes

- ¹ “OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book,” Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, accessed November 9, 2022, <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/probation/qa07102.asp?qaDate=2019>.
- ² CYFS was known as DYFS (the Division of Youth and Family Services) until 2021, when the Department of Health and Human Services merged child and youth services into one service area (Children, Youth and Family Services).
- ³ “Growth-Focused Youth Justice Case Management,” Growth-Focused Case Management, accessed October 12, 2022, <https://gfcy-youthjustice.com/>.
- ⁴ Data provided by CYFS.
- ⁵ Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Initiative grant that supported implementation of the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol—a mechanism for assessing and aligning programming with best practices—funded a quality assurance specialist position to oversee and lead the initiative.
- ⁶ “Dialectical Behavior Therapy,” accessed October 5, 2022, <https://depts.washington.edu/uwbtrc/about-us/dialectical-behavior-therapy/>.
- ⁷ “About Us,” Milwaukee Turners, accessed November 9, 2022, <https://www.milwaukeeeturners.org/>.
- ⁸ Community grant application provided by CYFS.
- ⁹ Rotation of Judicial Assignments (amended December 9, 2002), Milwaukee County Circuit Court Rules.
- ¹⁰ “Wraparound Milwaukee,” Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services, accessed October 14, 2022, <http://wraparoundmke.com/>; “Children’s Behavioral Health Services,” Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services, accessed October 14, 2022, <https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/DHHS/BHD/Childrens-Services>.
- ¹¹ “Growth-Focused Youth Justice Case Management,” Growth-Focused Case Management, accessed October 12, 2022, <https://gfcy-youthjustice.com/>.

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