



Closing Youth Prisons: Lessons from Agency Administrators

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Over the past several decades, the knowledge base about how to address juvenile delinquency and improve outcomes for youth and families has grown considerably. The documented benefits of well-designed community-based programming over residential facilities have spurred a movement away from the outdated institutional-youth-prison model and toward more effective community-based solutions. States and localities are exploring how to support a new juvenile justice approach that builds continua of care and opportunity in communities disproportionately impacted by youth incarceration and prioritizes fair, equitable, and effective treatment for all youth. This is the next frontier of juvenile justice reform, and effective strategies for closing youth correctional facilities and redirecting resources to community-based solutions must be identified. Juvenile justice administrators are uniquely positioned to lead facility closure efforts as part of broader system reform.

In the summer of 2018, the Urban Institute convened a small group of current and former juvenile justice system administrators who had successfully led facility closure efforts to discuss lessons learned and their advice for other administrators considering reform. Drawing on supplementary interviews and publicly available information, this brief summarizes what we learned from that conversation into key takeaways for administrators interested in pursuing closure efforts as part of broader system reform.

BOX 1

Methodology

On August 8, 2018, Urban facilitated an “Administrators’ Roundtable on Facility Closure” with six current and former juvenile justice corrections administrators. Urban also reviewed relevant research, reports, and news coverage of youth corrections facility closures to supplement administrators’ insights with real-world examples. This brief summarizes key findings from the roundtable and document review.

Additional Resources

For logistical guidance on facility closure, including meeting staff needs and project management, see the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators’ [toolkit](#) on facility closure and downsizing juvenile justice systems (CJCA 2018). For guidance on other elements of broader reform, see the following Urban resources:

- Love and coauthors’ “Transforming Closed Youth Prisons: Repurposing Facilities to Meet Community Needs” (2018)
- Harvell and coauthors’ *Promoting a New Direction for Youth Justice: Strategies to Fund a Community-Based Continuum of Care and Opportunity* (2019)
- Sakala, Harvell, and Thomson’s *Public Investment in Community-Driven Safety Initiatives: Landscape Study and Key Considerations* (2018)

The Case for Closure

Over the past several decades, research has demonstrated that confinement negatively impacts youth by increasing recidivism¹ and harming their mental health, physical well-being, and education (Holman and Ziedenberg 2006; Kashani et al. 1990; Mace, Rohde, and Gnau 1997). Moreover, youth facilities are extremely expensive—they cost states an average of \$148,767 a year per youth (Petteruti, Schindler, and Ziedenberg 2014) and have negligible public safety benefits compared with community-based alternatives. For example, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy estimated that whereas the monetary benefit in terms of cost of crime was \$1.98 for every \$1 spent on youth detention, \$1 investments delivered \$3.36 in benefits from diversion and mentoring programs, \$10.82 from aggression replacement training, and \$13.36 from multisystemic therapy. It concluded that investing in incarceration takes funding from more effective programs (Aos et al. 2001). Furthermore, youth abuse in institutional facilities is widespread—research has documented systematic mistreatment of youth in juvenile correctional facilities in 29 states since 2000 (Mendel 2011), and a 2013 Bureau of Justice Statistics survey found that one in eight incarcerated youths reported being sexually victimized in the past year (Beck et al. 2013).

As this knowledge has been incorporated into practice and policy, many states have significantly reduced their incarcerated juvenile populations, acknowledging the benefits of keeping youth in the community and recognizing that diversion (or avoidance of further system involvement altogether) is

the best option for many youths. The number of youths detained or placed out of home fell by more than half between 2000 and 2016 and continued falling in 2017.² This decrease has also shed light on how decrepit and outdated youth facilities are around the US. Many states closed such facilities as these populations decreased—the number of youth residential facilities operating nationwide decreased 42 percent between 2000 and 2016³—but many remain open and are operating significantly below capacity.

Juvenile justice administrators can help lead facility closure efforts and leverage that change for additional reform. They are also often uniquely positioned to implement administrative changes that reduce unnecessary youth incarceration and advance policy reforms needed to facilitate smarter youth supervision strategies.

Lessons from Administrators Who Have Led Closure Efforts

The administrators we spoke with all agreed that facility closure is a critical component of broader system reform. Many US juvenile justice systems have fundamentally transformed their approaches to justice, strictly limiting incarceration and embracing community-based alternatives that connect youth and families with critical services and opportunities at home. Localities increasingly recognize the importance of using developmentally appropriate practices and embracing effective ways of changing long-term behavior. Facility closure can be integral to such change efforts by limiting youth incarceration capacity and freeing up resources for effective community-based approaches.

Administrators shared recommendations for other agency leaders interested in spearheading facility closure efforts. Below, we cover the following four key recommendations:

- maximize windows of opportunity
- strategically partner with advocates
- collaborate with youth, families, and other key stakeholders
- use data and research to make the case for closure and combat counterproductive narratives

Maximize Windows of Opportunity

Administrators discussed the importance of establishing a plan for facility closure while ensuring that plan allows enough flexibility for taking advantage of new windows of opportunity. Because facility closure is often not an end in itself, linking a specific, targeted end goal for the closure effort to broader reforms can keep change efforts on track. For example, closing a facility may be one step toward ensuring more youths are served through a robust continuum of community care and opportunity. Explicitly establishing an end goal can focus day-to-day decisionmaking on broader objectives. Moreover, after identifying an end goal, you can create a roadmap for achieving it and use data to ensure that roadmap is working.

However, although a plan provides an important framework, administrators stressed that because windows of opportunity that can naturally facilitate closure efforts may arise, it is important not to restrict yourself by overemphasizing planning. Opportunities arise in many ways and can include changes in executive or legislative leadership, seminal events and litigation, and significant decreases in the incarcerated population.

CULTIVATING NEW CHAMPIONS DURING TRANSITIONS

It is also important to have people outside your agency championing facility closure and broader reform efforts, and administrators can take steps to build champions—especially political figures—for their cause. Administrators recommended thinking strategically about when and how to involve political figures. A newly elected or appointed official or even one who is early in their career may be seeking a priority issue and/or be particularly open to learning more about the juvenile justice system and reform opportunities. There can also be opportunities for political figures to take ownership of such issues, which often begins with open conversations between those figures and administrators (or others) who can answer questions and address concerns. Bringing potential champions to facilities can also help. Politics can be particularly contentious and a critical consideration, and administrators and their partners should assess the role politics are likely to play and identify political figures who would make good champions.

LEVERAGING LITIGATION AND OTHER SEMINAL EVENTS

Litigation and other seminal events can also be impetuses for reform. Though ongoing federal litigation and intervention can be burdensome to juvenile justice agencies, they can also present opportunities to highlight system abuses and fuel motivation for closing youth facilities. Department of Justice investigations lead to public reports highlighting problems with states' institutional youth prison models and carry weight with stakeholders (such as governors). Administrators can leverage those findings to advocate for closure efforts and for funding for alternatives to incarceration.

BOX 2

Case Study: Leveraging Litigation to Force Closure in Wisconsin

Litigation was a powerful driver of reform in Wisconsin. Litigation typically concerns conditions of confinement, and many states have entered into consent decrees with the federal government, committing to improving facilities. Wisconsin's primary juvenile correctional facility, the Lincoln Hills School for Boys and Copper Lake School for Girls, faced several lawsuits and a criminal investigation over its poor conditions and mistreatment of youth.

Lincoln Hills was plagued with problems beginning in 2012. One young woman there attempted suicide, and after slow responses from correctional officers suffered permanent physical and cognitive damage. Another teenager had two toes amputated after a guard closed a cell door on his foot. In 2018 and 2019, the Wisconsin Department of Corrections paid nearly \$25 million across multiple settlements related to Lincoln Hills.

Juvenile justice administrators and state leaders can cite such problems to push conversations beyond marginal improvements and advocate for closure, which is what happened in Wisconsin. After

multiple civil lawsuits and four turnovers of prison leadership within two years, Governor Walker pushed to close Lincoln Hills in January 2018. That March, the Wisconsin legislature passed Assembly Bill 953 requiring that the facility be closed by 2021. Though plans are still developing, the bill's goal is to ensure new spaces are smaller and strategically located throughout the state so youth remain closer to their families. As then Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections Litscher stated, "Evidence-based practices says that their recidivism and return to the community is much better adjusted if we can provide the services within the community."

Sources: Kelly Meyerhofer, "Wisconsin Settles for \$5 Million in More Lincoln Hills, Copper Lake Cases," *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 21, 2019; Patrick Marley, "State Assembly Votes to Delay the Closure of Lincoln Hills Teen Prison," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 20, 2019; Molly Beck, "Scott Walker's Office Warned in 2012 of Safety Issues at Lincoln Hills," *Wisconsin State Journal*, February 12, 2016; Jason Stein and Bill Glauber, "Wisconsin to Close Controversial Youth Prison by 2021, under Measure Signed by Gov. Scott Walker Friday," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 30, 2018; "Gov. Walker plans to close Lincoln Hills-Copper Lake Prisons," *NBC 15*, January 4, 2018.

Strategically Partner with Advocates

Advocates can be critical partners for juvenile justice administrators during closure efforts and help them pursue their goals most effectively. Administrators should learn about advocates' priorities, perspectives, strengths, and strategies. This foundational information will help you strategically involve them to varying degrees, provide them necessary information, partner on tasks as appropriate, and support their efforts when possible.

Administrators stressed that it is important to embrace the value advocates can add and work from the same playbook. Advocates can fill important roles that administrators sometimes cannot, such as identifying stakeholder partners, meeting with legislators, advocating for resources to be redirected, advocating community reinvestment, doing legislative analysis, and lobbying. In addition, advocates can serve as "credible messengers" who promote administrators and their plans to other advocacy groups.

BOX 3

Considering What Will Happen to a Facility after Closure

Considering what will happen to a facility after it closes can ensure it is not reopened as a youth or adult prison. Although closed youth prisons can drain taxpayer dollars, they can also be repurposed as community resources, leveraged to create sustainable funding streams, or sold for a one-time monetary payment. Though this brief does not focus on such strategies,⁴ those conversations should begin early during the planning process, and administrators should consider and pursue plans to ensure facilities do not reopen. Agencies can consider transferring closed facilities to other government agencies, such as the military. Another option is to attract private-market interest by issuing competitive requests for proposals, an approach that can be especially effective in certain locations, such as urban areas. Agencies can also consider social impact initiatives, which might involve basing "return on investment" on impact rather than money.

Partnering with advocates involves providing them information, education, and support to help them make informed arguments and craft their message for different audiences. Being informed about system metrics and reform plans will allow advocates to prioritize relevant issues related to closure efforts' overarching goals. This can also help ensure resources are used effectively to support issues that will have clear impacts. Administrators should consider providing advocates access to and information about data, budgets, and their state's juvenile justice system and educate advocates about relevant issues, such as providing budget briefings.

Effectively partnering with advocates also involves assessing each advocacy group's priorities, assets, goals, and strategies. This is important because the roles advocates can fill vary, and you will want to strategically engage them for varying purposes and to varying degrees throughout reform processes. For example, advocates can be effective legal advocates, policy advocates, and programmatic monitors, and because advocacy groups play different roles, understanding that landscape is critical for effective partnerships. One particularly important aspect to assess is advocates' relationships with youth, families, and communities. Consider holding an event with advocates, youth, families, and community members; advocates who can interact with youth and families effectively will fill certain roles better.

Moreover, you should use this assessment to strategically partner with advocates to varying degrees. Develop strategies for engaging with each group and intentionally build and maintain relationships with groups that are assets to reform efforts. Also jointly identify specific tasks for partners and credit them for wins. True partnership, done strategically and without micromanaging, is an asset to closure efforts.

Partnering with advocates involves risk and a willingness to be transparent and share some power. Advocates will sometimes disagree with you and some will not fulfill their obligations. And although developing specific strategies and assessing advocates can mitigate these risks, they are never fully eliminated. Ultimately, however, the administrators we spoke with generally found that the benefits of strategically using advocates outweigh the risks.

BOX 4

Case Study: Washington, DC, Partners with Advocates to Close Oak Hill

In Washington, DC, partnerships with local advocates were critical for closing the Oak Hill youth prison. In 2004, the Council of the District of Columbia passed several juvenile justice reform bills mandating that Oak Hill be closed by 2009 and created the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) to do so. However, closing DC's largest youth prison within five years was a daunting task, and DYRS relied heavily on the city's foundation and nonprofit community.

One step DYRS took was to form the DYRS Advisory Board, a panel of local community and foundation leaders that became a sounding board for the agency's ideas and a resource for best practices. Moreover, DYRS Director Vincent Schiraldi and the leadership team met regularly with other nonprofit leaders throughout the closure, and they formed a shared vision and goals to establish how they could best work together. Through these formal and informal channels, DYRS gained access to

resources such as insight from national experts on educational programming, behavioral health services, and facility operations and design. These resources dramatically shaped the New Beginnings Youth Development Center, the 60-bed facility that replaced Oak Hill and houses substantially fewer youths (30 as of May 2019), has a top-tier school, and offers individualized mental health services.

Source: “Population Statistics for DYRS-Run Facilities,” District of Columbia Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, accessed June 19, 2019.

Collaborate with Youth, Families, and Other Key Stakeholders

YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Youth and families—including those impacted by juvenile correctional facilities and, more broadly, those in communities disproportionately impacted by youth incarceration—are critical stakeholders in justice reform, can fiercely advocate for change, and are typically strong opponents when their goals are not aligned with yours. Importantly, they can also be critical allies. Building relationships with youth and families, giving them opportunities to offer meaningful input about their needs and desires, and building strategic alliances with them can benefit reform in the long run.

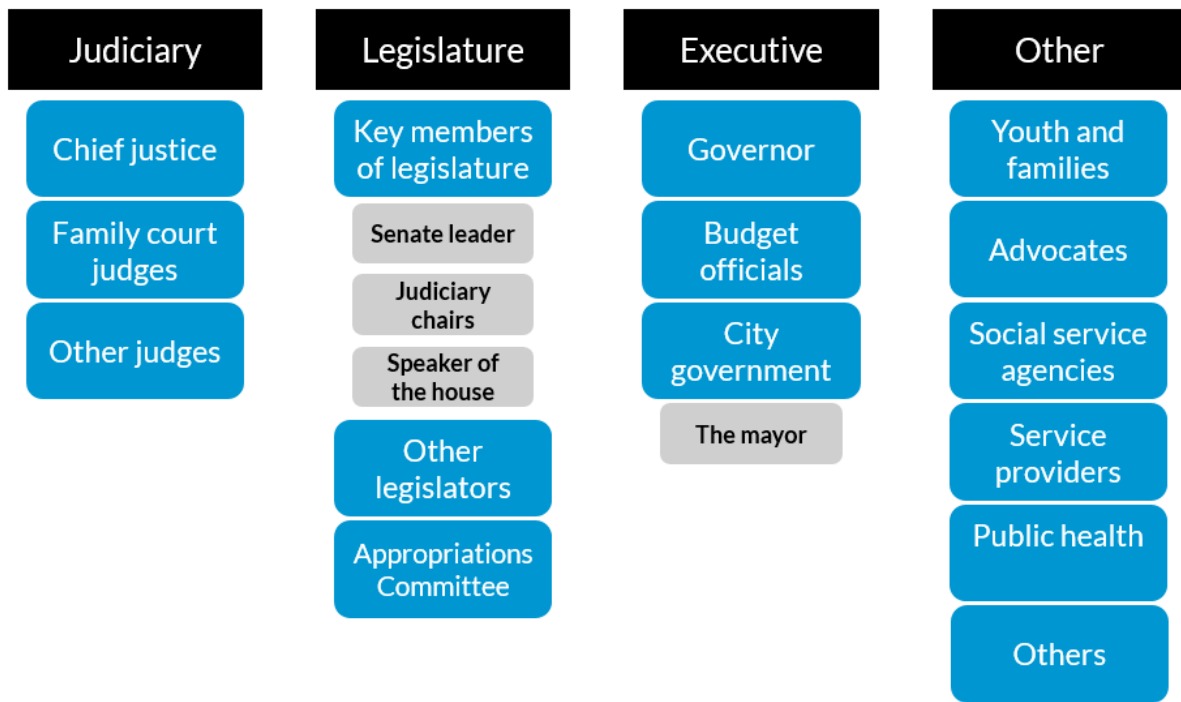
Youth and families can engage in reform in various ways, including lobbying. Building cohorts of youth, families, and community members can make reforms sustainable. They also have firsthand knowledge of what is happening on the ground and influence over local policymakers. When community members are engaged, local politicians often notice and care, and although government agencies are limited in their ability to engage in lobbying, well-informed community members can be particularly strong advocates for juvenile justice reform. Administrators who take time to educate community partners about relevant issues can support such advocacy. Consider educating community members and contextualizing the justice system and broader fight for civil rights. Moreover, consider using a “credible messenger” program—this model promotes a holistic, community-centered approach that links youth and their families with mentors with shared experiences in their own neighborhoods (for more on this approach, see the [Credible Messenger Justice Center](#)).

OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND ALLIES

Key stakeholders differ between states, and identifying them in your jurisdiction (figure 1) is an initial step in successful closure efforts. Stakeholders can help you identify other people and groups who need to be on board with your efforts.

FIGURE 1

Potential Stakeholders to Identify



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Stakeholder engagement can take many forms and vary for different goals and people, but it will likely involve strategically sharing information about your plans. Meeting stakeholders in person and ensuring they know who you are can be important. You should also educate them about the state of facilities and the efficacy of community-based solutions, particularly stakeholders who influence policy and budgetary decisions. Having people—including political figures, budget officials, legislators, judges, governors, and mayors—visit the facility you want to close can also get them to buy in. Also consider having them visit community-based programs to see the alternatives to incarceration.⁵

Administrators developing strategic plans to engage advocates and allies should also broaden the continuum and look beyond traditional advocacy groups. The media can be a particularly critical ally, and strategic media engagement can benefit closure efforts. Because the media can help or hinder closure efforts, consider educating media members as you would advocates, including by training them to report in the juvenile justice space. In addition, administrators can speak with local newspapers about the reforms and their perspectives on the work, and they can create opportunities for youth and families to share their stories with local media.

Finally, consider other unexpected allies. These might include faith communities, parent-teacher associations, housing groups, child welfare groups, victims' groups, police departments, and prosecutors' offices.

BOX 5

Case Study: Youth and Families Lead the Charge to Close Tallulah in Louisiana

The power of youth and families is best encapsulated by the fight to close the Swanson Correctional Center for Youth in Monroe, Louisiana (known locally as “Tallulah”). Tallulah was notorious as an abusive and inhumane facility. In 1996, the US Department of Justice launched an investigation and found it had as many as 400 cases of violence a month. However, despite that investigation and many settlements, violence and abuse continued. In 2010, Tallulah youths’ families and friends advocating for safer conditions became fed up with inaction and decided to organize formally into Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children. The group set goals to close the facility and ignite broader juvenile justice reform through legislative advocacy, grassroots organizing, and media outreach. Despite strong opposition from agency leaders, the coalition launched a campaign that ultimately succeeded.

Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children publicly announced itself and its purpose at the “Mock Jazz Funeral,” which members organized to march against and mourn their children’s loss of freedom. Attention to the group skyrocketed, the “Close Tallulah Now!” campaign launched, and its efforts succeeded. In 2003, through intensive lobbying and coordinated efforts with the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, Louisiana passed the Juvenile Justice Reform Act (Act 1225). The legislation closed Tallulah, led to a decrease in statewide youth incarceration from 2,000 to 350 children in 2004, and transformed residential placements. Since passing, some of the act’s components have been repealed and people have complained about the alternative facilities’ conditions. Reformers continue fighting for incarcerated youth and are focusing on these new developments.

Sources: Xochitil Bervera, “The Death of Tallulah Prison,” *AlterNet*, June 24, 2004; Sheila Bedi, *Breaking Down the Walls: Lessons Learned from Successful State Campaigns to Close Youth Prisons*, Youth First, accessed February 19, 2020; “Partnering with Families,” Justice for Families, accessed October 22, 2019; Gina Womack, “Why New Orleans Should Invest In, Not Incarcerate, Its Youth,” *Marguerite Casey Foundation*, June 12, 2019; Della Hasselle, “Critics Point to Problems in Louisiana’s Reformed Juvenile Justice System,” *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*, October 5, 2014.

Use Data and Research to Make the Case for Closure and Combat Counterproductive Narratives

Collecting and using data is critical for any closure effort. During planning, you can invest in improving systems for data collection, use, and tracking. Consider creating an analytical division dedicated to data tracking that can continuously track metrics that will help you argue for closure and prepare to answer stakeholders’ questions. Such metrics might include the following:

- overall system bed capacity
- number of youths in facilities and their movement
- staff-to-youth ratios
- outcomes for youth in communities and facilities
- drivers of the incarcerated youth population in specific localities
- costs of incarceration and alternatives

You can use data to create compelling narratives that will support your closure effort and help you refute opposition. Combining your agency's metrics and other system-driver metrics with research on evidence-based practices can be effective. And supplementing these quantitative metrics with qualitative anecdotes about youth can also create compelling narratives. You should also strategically share data with advocates and other stakeholders, as well as information that can specifically address their concerns or issues of interest. This could include providing local stakeholders information from a specific location or sharing topic-specific data with advocates interested in that topic.

BOX 6

Taking Narratives about Serious and Violent Offenses Head-On

Anticipating and preparing to address opposition can be critical in ensuring closure efforts succeed, and data can be a powerful tool for combating narratives that hinder those efforts. One pervasive narrative used to oppose closure efforts concerns violence and youth who are “too dangerous” to be in the community. Although data contradict this narrative, it plays on people's fears and demands strategic attention.

One strategy for combating that narrative is to share information about youth in out-of-home facilities, which often dispels the fallacy that incarcerated youth are a danger to society and require institutionalization. Another is to demonstrate that community-based alternatives to incarceration produce healthier youth, families, and communities, and to educate stakeholders and the public about appropriate alternatives to placement for youth who have committed serious crimes. Plan data collection and analysis that demonstrate improved outcomes for youth served in the community compared with those in facilities, and slowly and deliberately build a body of evidence that supports your narrative and share this information strategically. Moreover, you and your partners can focus on creating a robust community-based continuum of care and opportunity to demonstrate that, in addition to being more effective, community-based options are available and ready for use. Finally, you and community advocates can call out stakeholders and partners who perpetuate inaccurate and fear-driven narratives.

Relatedly, administrators can use decreases in the youth correctional population and the expanded research base to argue against the construction of youth correctional facilities during or after closure efforts. These data can be especially powerful in combating the pervasive argument that the problem with youth incarceration is decrepit facilities and that new ones are the solution. It is especially important to convey these messages to legislators and governors and demonstrate that the repurposing plan is a better use of the facility.

BOX 7

Case Study: Leveraging Research and Data to Promote Transformational Reform in New York

New York may provide the best example of an administrator—Gladys Carrion—who effectively leveraged research and data to close facilities. Critically, Carrion also implemented strategies to overcome labor unions’ entrenched opposition to closure (OCFS 2008). A campaign called “Empty Beds, Wasted Dollars” used research, data, and aggressive media messaging to expose the chronic underuse of the youth facilities—a dozen facilities across the state had less than 40 percent occupancy—and the poor outcomes for youth incarcerated there. Not only were the facilities underused, youth facilities did not effectively sustain public safety. Roughly 80 percent of the children who moved through the centers returned to them or went to prison within three years of their initial release.

Community-based treatment (the alternative to the facilities) had much lower recidivism and cost considerably less. The case for closing the facilities was strong and persuasive. This, combined with media attention, helped the New York State Office of Children and Family Services close 21 facilities over seven years. Recouping savings from those closures hinged on overcoming strong union opposition. The Office of Children and Family Services was cognizant of job losses and launched special teams to find alternative state employment opportunities for displaced staff. The centers closed because of the campaign and the Office of Children and Family Services’ coordinated efforts.

Conclusion and Broader Change

By being proactive, encouraging calculated collaboration, and planning strategically, administrators can lead efforts to successfully close youth facilities—one goal toward the larger objective of creating community-based continua of care and opportunity for youth. Creating a network and support system for you and other leaders attempting to close facilities can mitigate the risk of engaging in these efforts, shift incentives, and encourage engagement. Moreover, building champions for change outside your agency can bolster closure efforts. And most importantly, involving and prioritizing youth, families, and community members is critical for making reforms effective and sustainable.

Closure is a process step, not an end goal. During closure efforts, administrators and agencies should consider the broader goals of creating a strong continuum of care and opportunity that includes services, resources, and opportunities for youth. By investing in community development, agencies can strengthen their communities, which in turn facilitates closure efforts and maximizes youths’ chances of success. Finally, involving agencies outside the juvenile justice system is critical. Foster care, welfare, and education agencies all have a responsibility to youth, and they can be integral in establishing a community-based continuum of care that improves outcomes for youth, families, and their communities.

Notes

- ¹ For example, see Aizer and Doyle (2015), Baglivio (2009), Lipsey (1992), and Fendrich and Archer (1998).
- ² C. Puzzanchera, S. Hockenberry, T. J. Sladky, and W. Kang, "Juvenile Residential Facility Census Databook," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2018, <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/jrfdcdb/>.
- ³ Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, Sladky, and Kang, "Juvenile Residential Facility Census Databook."
- ⁴ For more information on strategies for repurposing youth facilities, see [Transforming Closed Youth Prisons: Repurposing Facilities to Meet Community Needs](#). For more information on leveraging land value to generate financial resources, see [Promoting a New Direction for Youth Justice: Strategies to Fund a Community-Based Continuum of Care and Opportunity](#).
- ⁵ "A Seat at the Table: Secure Care from the Community's Perspective," Rise for Youth, 2018.

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