

# TEN WAYS TO TRANSFORM YOUTH JUSTICE

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

These 10 standards are designed to guide youth justice systems away from practices that punish and isolate young people — and toward approaches that strengthen young people’s family and community connections, expand opportunities and promote meaningful accountability.

Grounded in research and shaped by insights from practitioners nationwide, each standard highlights a core element of an effective youth justice system. While every jurisdiction begins from a different place, the standards provide a shared vision — and a practical roadmap — for change.

See how transformation can take shape in practice by reading more about the standards below and using the interactive tool at <https://www.aecf.org/explore/improve-youth-justice>.

- 1. Partner With Youth, Families and Communities.**
- 2. Expand Opportunity for All.**
- 3. Lead Toward a Shared Goal.**
- 4. Engage and Support Staff.**
- 5. Rely on Probation for Most Serious Offenses.**
- 6. Divert Young People From the System to Community.**
- 7. Center Relationships in Probation Practice.**
- 8. Limit Probation Conditions.**
- 9. Respond to Violations With Alternatives to Confinement.**
- 10. Use Data to Monitor Results and Propel Innovation.**

## 1. PARTNER WITH YOUTH, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Probation engages and partners with youth, families and communities, relying on community-based organizations as the primary vehicle for the delivery of services, support and interventions for young people.

### INDICATORS

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| 1 | The department maintains partnerships with community organizations and other caring adults in neighborhoods where young people on probation live. Probation staff rely on those non-system partners to connect young people with positive opportunities, such as exploring their interests, building skills and contributing to the well-being of their communities. |
| 2 | The department employs or contracts with peer mentors or navigators to support families.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 3 | Fines and fees are not imposed on young people or their families.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 4 | Youth and families served by the system are involved in juvenile justice planning and compensated accordingly.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

## 2. EXPAND OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

The department's policies and practices help ensure all young people can reach their potential.

### INDICATORS

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| 1 | Data is disaggregated by race and ethnicity, and results are analyzed to identify decision points where policy or practice changes could advance opportunity for all. |
| 2 | A high-level committee or work group within the department is empowered to follow the data to identify, understand and propose strategies to correct disparities.     |
| 3 | The department develops and implements policy or practice changes that work to remove barriers that keep groups of young people from opportunity.                     |

### 3. LEAD TOWARD A SHARED GOAL

Probation leadership aligns training, budgeting and planning with continuous improvement in transforming juvenile probation, repeatedly asking “how are we doing?” and “could we do it better?”

#### INDICATORS

- 1 Training programs for new probation staff include the essentials of probation transformation:
  - expanding the use of diversion;
  - minimizing out-of-home placements;
  - limiting probation supervision time;
  - regarding probation officers as coaches not as referees;
  - focusing probation on promoting youth well-being;
  - expanding opportunities for all;
  - basing decisions on disaggregated data; and
  - relying on community-based organizations, youth and families as true partners.
- 2 System leaders approach annual budget processes as opportunities to support probation transformation and increase funding for positive youth development services.
- 3 Probation leaders continually seek and respond to feedback from young people, families, staff and other stakeholders.
- 4 Probation leaders hold annual convenings to evaluate and plan for probation transformation that include participation by staff, community members, family members and young people with lived experience.

### 4. ENGAGE AND SUPPORT STAFF

Probation leadership engages and supports staff as key actors in probation transformation.

#### INDICATORS

- 1 Probation leaders and supervisors include staff with active caseloads in planning for new or revised policies.
- 2 Probation leaders and supervisors prioritize communication between staff and management and offer mechanisms to support it, such as team meetings.
- 3 Probation leaders make trend data available to staff and encourage staff to share ideas, identify issues and hold leaders accountable for solutions.
- 4 Probation leaders and supervisors support emerging leaders and provide incentives for staff to contribute to probation transformation.

## 5. RELY ON PROBATION FOR MOST SERIOUS OFFENSES

Probation policy, practice and structure aim to minimize out-of-home placement and conserve probation resources for youth with serious charges who pose a significant risk to public safety.

### INDICATORS

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| 1 | At least 70% of new probation cases are based on an underlying felony adjudication.                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 2 | Department policy and/or court practice provides that probation officers may not recommend disposition to an out-of-home placement until a family team meeting and/or case staff meeting has been convened to explore all possible alternatives, including emergency intervention strategies. |
| 3 | Funding mechanisms at the county and state levels exist to incentivize the use of probation over placement, and local decision-makers leverage those funding mechanisms to maximize resources for community-based support and interventions.                                                  |
| 4 | Department policy does not mandate out-of-home placement for any youth, regardless of offense or risk profile. Statutory mandates are narrowly applied and tracked annually.                                                                                                                  |

## 6. DIVERT YOUNG PEOPLE FROM THE SYSTEM TO COMMUNITY

Law enforcement, prosecutors and the probation department partner with and direct adequate resources to local community-based organizations to steer young people away from the formal system and toward an array of community-led diversion options and services.

### INDICATORS

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| 1 | At least 60% of youth accused of delinquent conduct are diverted from juvenile probation, including all youth who do not pose a significant risk to public safety.                                                        |
| 2 | Law enforcement and schools use alternatives-to-arrest for youth involved in disruptive behavior.                                                                                                                         |
| 3 | Following an arrest, prosecutors, probation departments and/or court-based intake staff have options to divert young people away from juvenile probation and toward community-based support, services and accountability. |
| 4 | Youth have access to an array of diversion options, which may include simple warnings, restorative justice interventions and referrals for individual services.                                                           |
| 5 | There is no “informal probation” (whereby youth diverted from formal court processing are overseen by probation officers and required to comply with probation conditions).                                               |
| 6 | Diversion opportunities are not conditional (non-compliance doesn’t pull the youth back into the system).                                                                                                                 |

## 7. CENTER RELATIONSHIPS IN PROBATION PRACTICE

Probation is a time-limited, relationship-based intervention, with probation officers serving more as coaches than referees.

### INDICATORS

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| 1 | Young people and families, defined broadly, are included in case planning.                                                                                                                             |
| 2 | Case plans address identified needs, engage young people in positive youth development activities and contain realistic expectations and goals that are meaningful to young people and their families. |
| 3 | The duration of probation supervision rarely exceeds six to nine months, and almost never exceeds one year.                                                                                            |
| 4 | Case management prioritizes incentives to encourage positive behavior by offering opportunities and rewards valued by youth.                                                                           |

## 8. LIMIT PROBATION CONDITIONS

Probation orders with standardized terms of probation have five or fewer conditions of probation.

### INDICATORS

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| 1 | In collaboration with the court, probation orders limit the number of conditions to five or fewer.                 |
| 2 | Probation orders are framed in terms of individualized expectations and goals, rather than boilerplate conditions. |

## 9. RESPOND TO VIOLATIONS WITH ALTERNATIVES TO CONFINEMENT

Detention is never used to respond to technical violations of probation.

### INDICATORS

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| 1 | The department uses a structured decision process that eliminates the use of confinement as a consequence for technical violations.                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2 | A supervisory review, including an immediate discussion of available alternatives to confinement, is conducted for every youth who repeatedly violates probation rules.                                                                                                                                   |
| 3 | The department invests more heavily in person-based alternatives to confinement than in technology-based alternatives like electronic monitoring. Person-based alternatives to confinement include referrals to services, connection to a mentor, restorative practices and/or evening reporting centers. |

## 10. USE DATA TO MONITOR RESULTS AND PROPEL INNOVATION

The probation department relies on data for accountability and transparency, using data to continually assess practice and make improvements that enhance and promote probation transformation.

### INDICATORS

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| 1 | The juvenile probation department compiles annual statistics on basic measures, including incoming cases (referrals), formal prosecutions, dispositions to probation and out-of-home placement, admissions to detention, and length of stay in detention, on supervision and in placement. Each of those basic measures is broken down in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, ZIP code and most serious alleged offense. |
| 2 | In addition to quantitative data, the department uses surveys or focus groups to collect qualitative data from staff, family and young people. Qualitative data are reviewed, evaluated and used to inform policy, practice and programs.                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 3 | On an annual basis, the department conducts case reviews on a random sample of 10% of out-of-home placements to ask what policies, practices, programs or partnerships would have been required to avoid placement.                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 4 | On an annual basis, the department leads or participates in a root-cause analysis to identify underlying causes for racial and ethnic disparities and devises strategies to address imbalances in the quality, availability and cultural responsiveness of programs and services.                                                                                                                                      |