

25 Questions for Juvenile Probation Transformation

READINESS SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR PROBATION LEADERS

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

Ready for Juvenile Probation Transformation?

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has developed a tool that will help jurisdictions assess whether their juvenile probation practices are ready to undergo a transformation that would promote youth development instead of pulling young people deeper into the system. The tool's 25-statement format is based on the Foundation's [vision for transforming juvenile probation](#), which requires decision makers and other practitioners to think and act differently so they provide opportunity for young people.

With this tool and [other resources](#), the Foundation hopes to encourage local learning, action, research and innovation that will move juvenile probation toward its full potential for improving the entire juvenile justice system.

What Does Transforming Juvenile Probation Mean?

Through transformational change, systems will view the purpose of probation as focusing on promoting young people's personal growth and long-term success. It means reinventing the probation officer's role as a coach, collaborating and sharing responsibility with families and community partners and engaging with young people themselves to achieve success. It means putting essential values of racial and ethnic equity into practice and adopting an approach toward youth that focuses on strengths, is age-appropriate and responds to trauma.

The Foundation's vision to fundamentally transform juvenile probation is different than other efforts to boost juvenile probation's effectiveness. The difference lies in Casey's call for a much clearer consensus about whom probation is meant to serve and what it is meant to accomplish in order to make substantial progress at a systemic level.

Using This Tool

Who: Juvenile probation leaders should start by gathering representatives from line staff, middle management and leadership to respond collectively to the 25 statements in the tool.

What: The statements in this tool are organized around four themes:

- Mission and Values
- Diversion From Juvenile Court
- Probation Practices
- Accountability for Measurable Outcomes

How: On their own, each member of the group should rate their agreement with the statements based on a five-point scale, where zero is strongly disagree and four is strongly agree.

4 = Strongly agree

3 = Agree

2 = Neutral

1 = Disagree

0 = Strongly disagree

The score is a jumping off point for a larger discussion about readiness for probation transformation. The point totals in and of themselves do not matter, but may reveal important trends, such as thematic areas for improvement.

As a group, the members should discuss one statement at a time. The facilitator should point out whether the group is generally aligned in their responses or reactions diverge. The statements are designed so that agreeing strongly correlates most closely with readiness for probation transformation. If the group's response is just "agree," then the group should discuss what it would take for them to agree strongly. When the response is neutral or negative, discuss what action steps the agency would have to take to respond more positively. Does the agency have the will to change?

Most jurisdictions will have a mix of responses or skew toward neutral or disagreeing. Please be honest about where you are as an organization.

MISSION AND VALUES		RATING
Q1	Purpose of probation. Our probation department has a mission statement or written policies that specifically define the purpose of probation.	
Q2	Fidelity to probation transformation. Our mission statement or written policies are explicit that we:	
	...limit probation to youth who pose a significant risk for serious and escalating offending without more guidance and support (with other youth diverted from the court system to a continuum of diversion options).	
	...focus on promoting personal growth, behavior change and long-term success for youth on probation caseloads.	
Q3	Strong values. Our mission statement or policies commit to each of the following:	
	...racial and ethnic equity (and reduced disparities);	
	...families as active participants in formulating and supporting their children's case plans and experience on probation, in partnership with probation officers;	
	...partnerships with community groups to offer meaningful opportunities locally, outside the justice system, for young people to build positive relationships with adults, pursue their interests and develop skills;	
	...young people achieving behavior change through positive incentives for good behavior rather than the threat of confinement or other sanctions for misbehavior or noncompliance; and	
	...confinement as an option only for young people who pose substantial imminent risk to public safety and never as a response to technical violations.	
Q4	Measurable goals. Our department is focused on results: it sets measurable goals for critical areas of probation practice, such as the use of individualized case planning or successful completion of probation. The department collects and analyzes data on all relevant measures by race, ethnicity and gender, and it regularly shares data on its performance against goals.	
Q5	Buy-in. Key players in the justice system demonstrate strong buy-in for the mission and values supporting probation transformation.	
	...Probation staff	
	...Judges	
	...Prosecutors	
	...Defense attorneys	
	...Other (identify other key players)	
TALK ABOUT YOUR AGENCY'S MISSION AND VALUES		

DIVERSION FROM JUVENILE COURT		RATING
Q6	Extensive use of prearrest diversion. Our jurisdiction diverts most youth accused of delinquent conduct (ideally 60% of cases or more), including all youth who do not pose significant risk to public safety. We limit formal court processing and the possibility of probation to youth at significant risk for serious and escalating levels of offending without more guidance and support.	
Q7	Varied diversion options. Our jurisdiction offers a broad continuum of diversion options and pathways, including:	
	...prearrest diversion by police, alternatives to arrest for misbehaviors at school and prosecutorial or court-intake diversion to informally process youth following arrest; and	
	...varying intensities and approaches for diversion including simple warnings, restorative justice interventions and individual service plans for youth with mental health or social service needs.	
Q8	Community led. Our jurisdiction has designated community partners not connected with the courts to handle the cases of all or most youth diverted from formal court processing. Specifically:	
	...All or most diversion interventions in our jurisdiction are delivered by community organizations and/or public human services agencies rather than the probation agency, prosecutor's office or court.	
	...Our jurisdiction has identified a single community-based organization or a coalition of organizations to oversee and coordinate juvenile court diversion.	
Q9	No "informal probation" or court consequences. Our jurisdiction ensures that once youth are diverted from formal processing, they cannot be returned to court without a new arrest for subsequent delinquency. More specifically, our jurisdiction has:	
	...abandoned the use of informal probation, where youth diverted from formal court processing are overseen by probation officers and required to comply with conditions of probation; and	
	...ended (or substantially constrained) the practice of refiling the cases of diverted youth if they fail to comply with diversion rules and requirements.	
TALK ABOUT DIVERSION FROM JUVENILE COURT		

PROBATION PRACTICES		RATING
Q10	No standard probation orders or conditions. Our juvenile court and probation agency refrain from imposing standardized or “one size fits all” conditions in all or most juvenile probation cases.	
Q11	Family-centered practice. Our department works closely with families and/or circle of care (support system) members in ways that promote effective participation in their children’s term of probation. Our department:	
	...asks young people to identify their family or circle of care, regardless of blood relations;	
	...provides tailored support for parents and families through peer mentors;	
	...creates a welcoming environment for family members, scheduling appointments at convenient times and locations and providing assistance with transportation and child care when needed; and	
	...conducts frequent surveys to determine family members’ opinions about the probation process.	
Q12	Collaborative case planning. Our probation officers involve youth, parents and other caring adults in a strengths-based case planning process. Specifically:	
	...Probation officers meet with parents, guardians and other family members before the case plans in new probation cases are established.	
	...The case planning process results in individualized case plans that:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contain realistic expectations and goals that are meaningful to and supported by young people and their families; 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • address identified needs; and 	
Q13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engage young people in positive youth development activities that build on their skills, interests and resources. 	
	Community connections and positive youth development. Probation partners extensively with community organizations — especially those rooted in neighborhoods where many young people on probation reside — to connect young people with caring adults and to engage them in constructive activities where they can explore their interests, build skills, develop their talents and contribute to the well-being of their communities.	
Q14	Rewards for attaining goals. Our department offers frequent rewards and recognition to young people when they achieve goals in their case plans and demonstrate good behavior.	
Q15	Constructive responses to unwanted behavior. To ensure consistent and proportionate responses when youth engage in problematic behavior or fail to meet their case plan goals, our agency follows a structured decision process, which eliminates the use of confinement as a consequence for technical violations.	

PROBATION PRACTICES		RATING
	Concerted action to promote racial and ethnic equity. Our probation department is taking steps such as the following to reduce racial and ethnic disparities (see the checklist for juvenile probation agencies on racial and ethnic equity and inclusion in <i>Transforming Juvenile Probation: A Vision for Getting It Right</i> for more steps):	
Q16	...We have a high-level committee or work group that meets regularly and pursues an aggressive agenda to promote racial and ethnic equity.	
	...We create an atmosphere for staff that is conducive to and encouraging of courageous, hard conversations about the intersection of race and the agency's work.	
	...We disaggregate and analyze results to identify decision points that exacerbate disparities.	
	...As equity problems are identified, we devise, monitor and revise strategies to address them. For instance, we might map our programs and services to see how well they reach youth in certain neighborhoods.	
Q17	No fines or fees. The probation agency and juvenile court abstain from imposing fines and fees on all or most young people and their families.	
Q18	Limited duration. Probation and the juvenile court limit the period of probation to six to nine months in most cases, with few cases exceeding one year.	
TALK ABOUT PROBATION PRACTICES		

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MEASURABLE OUTCOMES		RATING
Q19	Expanding the use of diversion. Our jurisdiction sets goals for diverting youth accused of misdemeanors and first-time nonviolent felonies.	
Q20	Minimizing out-of-home placements. Our jurisdiction is minimizing the use of confinement by establishing goals, policies and practices that:	
	...eliminate confinement as a consequence for technical violations;	
	...minimize the use of correctional and other out-of-home placements in all delinquency cases; and	
	...maintain and publish data on the use of correctional and other placements.	
Q21	Combating racial and ethnic disparities. Our probation department tracks its progress in reducing racial and ethnic disparities in the use of diversion, at decision points in the court process and more.	
Q22	Promoting positive youth development. Our probation department monitors its efforts to engage youth in positive youth development. Specifically, our department:	
	...requires and confirms that all case plans include meaningful positive youth development activities; and	
	...has established measures to determine whether young people on probation are attending school regularly, making academic progress, participating in constructive activities identified in their case plans and building connections with caring adults in their communities.	
Q23	Addressing risk factors. Our probation department monitors our effectiveness in addressing delinquency-related risk factors identified in the assessment process, such as substance abuse or academic failure. Specifically, we:	
	...set goals and monitor our performance in connecting youths with targeted services; and	
	...monitor how well intervention programs reduce identified risk factors.	
Q24	Partnering with families and community. Our jurisdiction evaluates its progress in areas of family and community engagement such as:	
	...providing support for parents and family members through parent-advocate or similar programs;	
	...contracting with community-based organizations located in neighborhoods where concentrations of youth on probation reside;	
	...establishing a family and/or community advisory council that is facilitated by a trusted independent community organization; and	
	...regularly surveying parents, family members and other community leaders to identify their priorities and concerns.	

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MEASURABLE OUTCOMES		RATING
	Enhancing community safety. Our probation department measures its success in enhancing community safety. Specifically, it measures:	
Q25	...progress toward reducing the frequency and seriousness of reoffending; and	
	...probation's success in helping youth build skills and relationships necessary for long-term success.	
TALK ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MEASURABLE OUTCOMES		