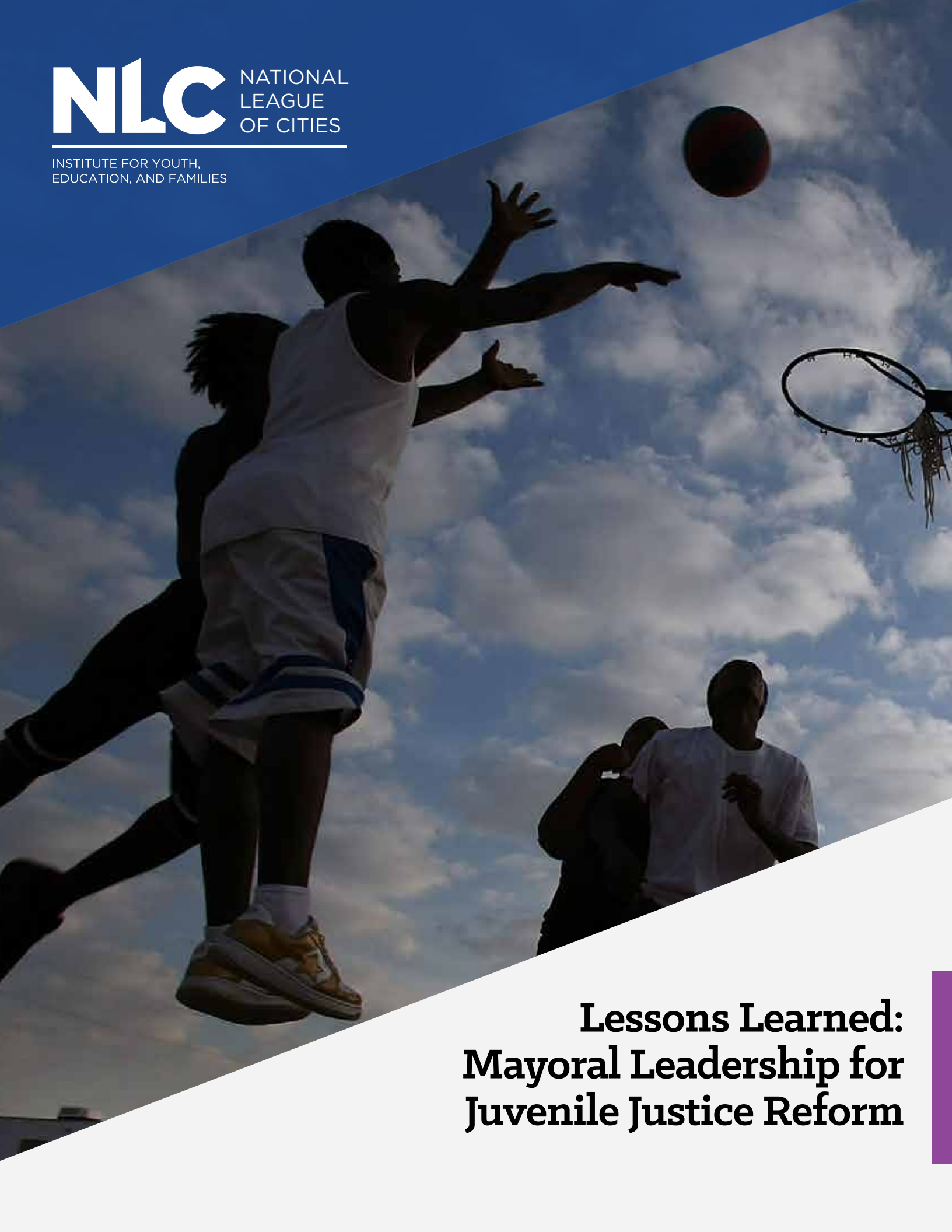




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Lessons Learned: Mayoral Leadership for Juvenile Justice Reform



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About the Authors

Insights shared by participating mayors and city team members from Gresham, Oregon; Las Vegas; Little Rock, Arkansas; Minneapolis; New Orleans; and Philadelphia make this report possible. National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education and Families' staff including Laura Furr, Program Manager for Justice Reform and Youth Engagement, and Todd Wilson, Senior Writer, compiled these examples and lessons learned to further support city leadership of juvenile justice reform. Andrew Moore, Director of Youth and Young Adult Connections, and Clifford M. Johnson, Executive Director, Institute for Youth, Education and Families, served as contributing editors.

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About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the nation's leading advocacy organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance. Through its membership and partnerships with state municipal leagues, NLC serves as a resource and advocate for more than 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans. NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC launched the YEF Institute in January 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city councilmembers and other local leaders play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth.

Since 2004, the Youth & Young Adult Connections team of the Institute has highlighted numerous city opportunities to lead on reengaging disconnected youth.

Executive Summary

City leaders who hold youth accountable for crime in developmentally appropriate ways stand to make better use of scarce resources and improve youth outcomes, which will likely improve long-term public safety as well. This document highlights mayoral leadership actions that have begun to produce results, thanks to an emphasis on evidence-informed, community-based accountability for young people who would otherwise enter the juvenile justice system. The document also introduces further opportunities for cities to see improvements in public safety, costs and outcomes.

Mayoral leadership enabled six cities participating in a recent National League of Cities technical assistance initiative, led by NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute), to contribute to achieving key local and national juvenile justice reform goals, including:

- Reducing the number of youth entering the juvenile justice system, and therefore the harm caused, at the earliest point of contact with police;
- Producing more equitable decisions about which youth enter the system and which get diverted; and
- Creating mechanisms to assess and refer youth to community-based services outside of the juvenile justice system.



This document highlights emerging city-led examples of the policies and processes that led to measurable progress, and describes continuing challenges. The experiences of Gresham, Oregon; Las Vegas; Little Rock, Arkansas; Minneapolis; New Orleans; and Philadelphia offer helpful lessons for cities of varying makeup and size.

City leaders achieved results via five key policy shifts.

- A. Mayors made public statements prioritizing juvenile justice reforms as part of their broader agendas.
- B. Following through on these statements, mayors directed scarce resources to achieve measurable goals.
- C. Mayors also convened local stakeholders, including representatives of other government agencies, community-based service providers and institutions of higher education in support of juvenile justice reforms.
- D. Recognizing that arrest serves as the front door to the justice system, mayors enlisted police leaders to assess youth arrest patterns and then develop or revise youth arrest policies.
- E. Finally, mayors supported more and better aligned community-based alternatives to the juvenile justice system.

Two supporting processes proved essential to city-led reforms. First, an increased reliance on more precise data, disaggregated in multiple ways, enabled cities to identify decision points at which current policies blocked progress toward goals. Second, mayors enlisted university partners to help evaluate needs and progress.

City leaders, their partners, researchers and policy experts have more to do to grasp the full promise of city leadership to prevent youth from entering the juvenile justice system. For example, police departments need better screening tools to make best use of resources, and service providers need better needs-strengths assessments to match youth with targeted services. In addition, cities struggle to build out a comprehensive set of community-based services that meet the needs of all youth, including youth potentially involved in the juvenile justice system. In some cases, enshrined roles of prosecutors also stand in the way of police department efforts to divert youth before the prosecutor’s office assesses a case.

I. Mayors Led Policy Shifts that Set the Stage for Measurable Progress

A. Mayors made public statements prioritizing juvenile justice reforms as part of their broader agendas.

Mayors led juvenile justice reforms by publicly linking juvenile justice reform to the overall agendas for their cities. For example, Las Vegas Mayor Carolyn Goodman linked juvenile justice reforms with her administration’s commitment to My Brother’s Keeper, President Obama’s call to action to ensure all boys and young men of color have equal opportunity to achieve their full potential. After the mayors of cities highlighted in this report participated in an intense learning and goal-setting process with the YEF Institute in March 2015, juvenile diversion appeared in some State of the City addresses—core statements of a mayor’s agenda.

“Many of these... are issues that should be diverted, and we are working on trying to make sure that our young people are not made a part of the criminal justice system when there are other alternatives and diversions available,” Little Rock Mayor Mark Stodola said during his 2016 State of the City address.

Also in 2016, Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges highlighted early progress achieved through reforms in her State of the City address: “Another long-term way to deter violence is to keep people

out of the criminal justice system to begin with. In the past 18 months, we have increased the number of juveniles involved in diversion, which has led to fewer youth entering the system.” Mayor Hodges’ agenda focused on equity as well as public safety, and Minneapolis’s measurable goals to increase the number of youth diverted from arrest and reduce the racial disparities in those diversion decisions reflected the broader agenda.



B. Mayors directed scarce resources to achieve measurable goals.

Throughout 15 months of YEF Institute technical assistance, each city dedicated scarce staff member time to achieve measurable progress toward goals. City governments generally do not hire staff to focus on juvenile justice-involved youth. These cities moved forward with reforms thanks to the attention of staff within the mayor’s office.

For example, Mayor Stodola identified existing city-funded services within the Department of Community Programs that could serve youth diverted away from the justice system. The mayor also established a goal for all youth diverted through a police-developed diversion protocol (highlighted below) to receive assessment and referral to services through this department.

To help measure progress toward city goals, Mayor Hodges asked the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) to dedicate data-collecting capacity to collect race and ethnicity data for all stops, even if a stop did not result in an arrest. This change allowed the mayor’s office to understand more fully how police interact with residents of color.

C. Mayors convened local stakeholders in support of juvenile justice reforms.

Mayors and other city leaders often need to use their strength as conveners to assemble the stakeholders who can advance juvenile justice reforms. For instance, Mayor Hodges’ staff brought together a group of community-based service providers that offer restorative justice options for diverted youth to establish a set of measurable program outcomes. The group now collects specific data to report to the mayor’s office to demonstrate progress on key measures, including rates of completion for referred youth and the length of time before and seriousness of future offenses for served youth. Thanks to this process, the city sees the programs as more accountable, and the mayor can better communicate the success of these programs at meeting city priorities. At the request of Mayor Stodola, Little Rock stakeholders met quarterly to design the local juvenile justice reform effort. Participants include representatives from two city agencies—the Little Rock Police Department and the Department of Community Programs—as well as the local school system.



In pursuing juvenile justice reforms in Gresham, staff followed Mayor Shane Bemis’ directive to bring diverse, culturally specific providers into the earliest conversations, with an emphasis on ensuring that young people and their families receive culturally appropriate services. Many of these providers had never worked together before, yet had strong ties with their respective communities.

D. Mayors enlisted police leaders to develop or revise youth arrest policies.

Reducing arrests in schools

Two cities joined the technical assistance cohort with pilot programs underway to reduce school-based arrests. Leaders in Little Rock and Philadelphia highlighted these efforts in response to the dual recognition that far too many youth are arrested in schools, disrupting education and creating negative long-term outcomes for many students, and that it appeared that referrals into the juvenile justice system had unnecessarily taken the place of school-level discipline procedures. The school-based arrest reduction efforts produced promising results in each city.

In Little Rock, for instance, a recent steep increase of youth arrests in school disturbed city leaders and police officials. Even amidst disruptions due to a state takeover of the local school system, the mayor and city manager called on the Little Rock Police Department (LRPD) to reduce arrests of students. LRPD’s team of school resource officers (SROs) adopted a new policy to divert many

youth away from arrest at school. Under the policy, schools only call SROs as a true last resort. SROs then do not automatically arrest, but rather call the juvenile court intake to review a set of eligibility criteria for diversion, including the current accused offense. The pilot program quickly and dramatically reduced the number of youth arrests in Little Rock’s public schools—down 40 percent in the first year alone. During the technical assistance period, Little Rock worked to develop this policy further, and to link it to services provided through another city department, as described in more detail below.

Little Rock police also joined MPD officers in a pilot training session to improve SROs’ knowledge of and responses to adolescent mental health needs. The interactive, 40-hour training, offered by the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, allowed officers to practice real-life skills for responding to mental health crises in school settings and better understand adolescent development.

In Philadelphia, as two major reform initiatives moved forward in the city—Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) and Models for Change—well-placed police leaders similarly seized an opportunity to reduce school-based arrests. Then-Deputy Commissioner of the Philadelphia Police Department, Kevin Bethel, instituted a new diversion protocol in May 2014 to reduce arrests in schools, which has since expanded further to include youth citywide. The city has witnessed a 60 percent drop in school-based arrests and a less than 15 percent

recidivism rate by young people diverted through the program.

Under the 2014 protocol, Philadelphia police officers do not arrest youth suspected of committing certain low-level offenses. Instead, officers contact the student’s parent or guardian and allow the young person to remain in school. Frontline officers receive extensive training in how to apply the protocol, and also engaged in its development. Crucially, the new protocol provides that the city does not charge for the diverted offense, even if the youth opts out or fails to comply with referrals. Bethel notes: “If a conversation with my officers was enough to keep you from doing something again, then that’s a win. If not, we’ll see you again and can charge you then.”

Within 72 hours of the initial contact, local social service providers from Philadelphia’s Department of Human Services meet with the youth’s family and make appropriate referrals. The protocol, which permits families to refuse to take part, has resulted in a 90 percent participation rate. Bethel explained the city’s rationale during a YEF Institute presentation: “They can opt out. If they opt out, then they are told they will not be eligible for the program again in the future. When they do opt out, my officers will go back to the house and try to convince the parents or family how important the program can be.”

Reducing racial and ethnic disparities in pre-arrest diversion decisions

Following a close look at juvenile arrest and diversion data, a relatively small policy shift enabled one city to obtain a measurable reduction in the disproportionate representation of black youth in the juvenile justice system. The MPD analyzed data showing which youth were deemed eligible for diversion based on a set of criteria. Diverted youth had the charge “closed and cleared” on their arrest record, with no further court involvement to follow, and were referred to restorative justice programs. Before the change, MPD diverted 90 percent of white youth and 23 percent of black youth. The revised criteria resulted in MPD diverting 31 percent of black youth and 88 percent of white youth.

MPD made this change thanks to detailed data collection and analysis, which identified the policy’s “prior offense” criterion as the single largest contributing factor to the disproportionate number of black youth excluded from diversion. MPD’s application of this criterion screened out youth with any prior arrests from diversion. MPD leaders and other stakeholders, including staff for Mayor Hodges, met to address the problem and increased the number of prior offenses allowed by one. This small shift immediately increased the overall number of black youth diverted, with the potential of reducing the disproportionate representation of black youth throughout subsequent decision points in the system.

More broadly, the city’s step also constituted a tangible local response to a relatively well-known nationwide

issue in which prior offense criteria propound systematic racial bias in diversion eligibility as well as worsened racial disparities deeper in the system. Observers recognize that higher prior arrest rates result from a history of heavy policing of communities of color.

E. Mayors supported community-based alternatives to the juvenile justice system.

Mayors increasingly recognize the importance of answering a key question: “Diversion to what?” Too commonly, diversion options function less as a system and more as patchwork, often with insufficient resources, cultural competence and capacity. Notably, four of the mayors of cities in the technical assistance cohort developed or expanded innovative solutions, relying on cost-sharing collaborations, to refer youth to community-based services.

Adding assessment and referral capacity

Two cities, Las Vegas and Gresham, focused efforts on establishing new juvenile assessment and service centers (JASCs), sometimes also referred to as juvenile reception centers. In so doing, they emulated an approach underway for several years in settings as disparate as Minneapolis and Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana. JASCs serve as one-stop centers to which police officers take diversion-eligible young people, as an alternative to booking at the precinct or detention center.

Once youth arrive at most JASCs, trained youth workers, often staff of independent

community non-profits, administer assessments and refer youth to services. The JASC also provides a safe and developmentally appropriate setting at which youth may wait for family members to pick them up, instead of in a police station.

Janus Youth Services, the independent non-profit contracted to run Gresham’s new JASC, opened the center’s doors in December of 2016 with full support from the Gresham Police Department and city and county officials. Gresham, an eastern suburb of Portland, lacked many of the resources of its larger neighbor, leaving local police departments throughout the county without options to drop off or divert youth in minor trouble. Gresham’s JASC—known as Reception Center-East—replicated a successful model Portland established as part of its local JDAI initiative and an example for others across the country. Janus staff assess youth needs and refer to the collaborative of service providers developed during the planning process. Janus can also transport homeless youth to their shelter in downtown Portland.

Similar to other JASCs across the country, in developing The Harbor as the local JASC, several partners in the Las Vegas area entered into a multi-jurisdictional, multi-agency agreement that describes the responsibilities of each party. The parties included the Clark County Department of Juvenile Justice Services (the lead agency), the City of Las Vegas, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, the Clark County School District, the Clark County District Attorney’s Office, and the Clark County

Department of Family Services. Given the intended alignment of city-supported diversion policy with other aspects of Mayor Goodman’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative, the city will also train Harbor staff on disproportionate minority contact.

In a move many cities could replicate, Las Vegas dedicated an unused city-owned building to host The Harbor, prioritizing creation of a space that facilitates drop-offs by law enforcement as well as walk-ins by youth and families. The design took inspiration from the Multi-Agency Resource Center in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana, which derived initial support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Models for Change initiative. In a manner similar to the Calcasieu Parish model, multiple agencies will staff The Harbor and can refer youth to it. This open-door design meets the needs of many families struggling to raise adolescents who often hear that government agencies cannot help them unless and until a child is arrested.

Expanding diversion infrastructure and operations

Two cities bolstered their diversion infrastructure, in part to handle an increased flow of young people who did not get arrested. Because Little Rock’s diversion goals prioritized keeping youth in school, officials viewed establishing a physical center for assessment and referral as a low priority. Instead, the City of Little Rock Department of Community Programs (DCP) developed an assessment and referral process that meets youth “where they are.” As noted above in the section on revised arrest

policies, Little Rock’s police department sends a “paper referral” for diverted youth to the DCP so the student can remain in school. A DCP case worker then contacts the youth and family to assess the youth’s needs and refers the youth to one of several pre-vetted contracted services. The Department maintains contracts with and funds community-based providers to serve diverted youth, including via a career development program.

Minneapolis’ pre-existing Juvenile Supervision Center (JSC) expanded its services for youth picked up for curfew violations during the technical assistance period. The city, county and the local school district share responsibility for funding and overseeing the JSC, with staffing by an independent non-profit called The Link.

II. Cities Improved Decision-making Processes to Support Sustainable Change

In addition to policy shifts, all six cities made key improvements to their decision-making processes, which stand a good chance of helping support sustained changes past leadership transitions and inevitable shifts in focus, as well as to deal with the risk of “reform fatigue.” Collecting data at the level of detail needed for the reforms initially posed a significant challenge to the cities. With time and effort, the cities increased their emphasis on better data collection, which now allows them to continue to measure success and revise policies and practices to meet goals.

Some cities also entered crucial partnerships with institutions of higher learning to measure needs and outcomes.

This step responded to a common struggle for cities, law enforcement agencies and school systems—how to put into place data-sharing agreements that protect privacy concerns and provide enough data to lead to meaningful decisions. The agencies sometimes turn to an independent third party with established privacy protections, such as an independent researcher or an institution of higher education to enable data sharing and analysis that works for everyone.

A. Cities acted based on more precise data.

Employing a data collection tool supplied by the YEF Institute, each



participating city took a renewed look at data regarding youth arrests and involvement in the juvenile justice system. For example, the tool asked cities to break arrest data down by race, ethnicity, gender, geography and offense. Some cities also collected time and location of arrest. These data proved essential to assist cities in identifying problems, setting measurable goals and assessing progress on those goals. For example, Philadelphia’s review of relevant data spotlighted arrests due to old, largely obsolete bench warrants. In response, prosecutor and probation offices collaborated to develop a list of requested bench warrant waivers, which they presented to the court for approval. In this manner, Philadelphia cleared more than 1,000 bench warrants and will continue to review bench warrants periodically to ensure that a backlog does not redevelop.

B. Mayors enlisted university partners to evaluate needs and progress.

Building upon their internal use of the data collection tool, Minneapolis, Las Vegas and Philadelphia came to rely on partnerships with institutions of higher learning to evaluate city data that shed light on the needs of local youth and progress toward juvenile justice reform goals. For example, Minneapolis established a partnership with the University of Minnesota to assess the success of a set of city-funded diversion programs. Before technical assistance from the YEF Institute began, the Philadelphia Police Department had entered into an agreement with Drexel

University to evaluate its school-based diversion policy.

The City of Las Vegas needed data from the local school system to identify the service needs and interventions best suited to youth in the city, especially youth who would be diverted from the juvenile justice system through two new diversion opportunities. To address this challenge, city officials entered into a data-sharing agreement with the Clark County School District. Under the agreement, a University of Denver researcher with prior research experience in Las Vegas will review school data on 200 youth detained in the local juvenile detention facility. Among questions she will examine: at which earlier points in education would diversion services have helped prevent use of detention. Utilizing a third-party reviewer with strong privacy protections already in place smoothed the way forward.

III. Areas for Development and Progress

In addition to witnessing important advances in each of the six cities, the brief technical assistance period also helped chart needs for additional supports for local efforts that can lead to continued improvements in outcomes. Researchers, experts, and practitioners within the field can further support local efforts by focusing on a few key resources for city leaders. Steps to take include: developing decision-making tools (or templates that cities can adapt for local use) to inform arrest and diversion decisions by frontline officers; supporting the development and alignment of robust continua of community-based services; educating and convincing system leaders so as to create greater buy-in to diversion reforms; enhancing supports for youth returning to cities after involvement in the juvenile justice system; and continuing to replicate good reform practices.

A. Developing new tools to inform arrest and diversion decisions.

Even as cities and their police departments institute arrest reduction and diversion efforts, officers still often lack objective field screening tools to use at the time of first contact. In part, this reflects the challenges involved with validating a risk screening tool for local use, and ensuring that a tool proves brief and simple enough to administer at the point of police contact. To further complicate the situation for cities, the juvenile justice field has yet to reach consensus on if or when to use risk-based screening tools, and what criteria will effectively reduce racial and ethnic disparities in arrest decisions. For instance, current diversion decisions frequently turn on numbers of prior offenses, as with the Minneapolis diversion policy. Yet intensity of police



presence in a given neighborhood and other factors may affect those numbers, which in any case may only crudely suggest the risk of reoffending.

Cities can also benefit from improved strengths and needs assessments. Researchers have repeatedly concluded that the match between a young person and the right service(s) will prove crucial to the success of the program and the youth. In addition to type of services, cities need to be able to identify the right level of service. “Overdosing” services can prove just as ineffective as not providing any services, and may prove harmful. Most cities have yet to put into use a proven assessment that weighs needs and strengths to calibrate “dosage,” especially a tool that case workers can complete without expensive licenses or certifications.

B. Aligning and developing a robust continuum of services for youth.

Cities and their partners in county and state government struggle to establish a comprehensive set of services that meet the needs of youth, especially youth diverted from the juvenile justice system. Key services include substance abuse treatment, mental health services at various levels of intensity, family therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, restorative justice, case management and the positive youth development activities every youth needs. Additional key services and supports include housing, transportation, education and employment. Prospective steps likely include: developing stronger collaboration

between city agencies and county-supported youth service providers; opening city-run services to youth diverted from the juvenile justice system; requiring city-supported or contracted service providers to serve, and even prioritize, youth involved in the juvenile justice system; and creatively applying public and private funds to support independent nonprofit service providers in neighborhoods with the greatest need. Co-locating diversion services such as those found in juvenile assessment and service centers with those offered by other youth-serving one-stops, such as youth employment or reengagement centers, could prove efficient.

C. Enlisting essential juvenile justice system stakeholders

Some cities that have attempted juvenile justice reform have encountered resistance from juvenile justice system agents, such as prosecutors or judges. As the juvenile justice field becomes more aware of the potential contribution of city leaders to the shared goals of juvenile justice reform—fewer youth in the system and secure facilities, reduced racial and ethnic disparities throughout the system, and better life outcomes for youth who interact with the system at any point—the opportunity exists to support mayors toward mutually beneficial collaboration between cities and juvenile justice systems.

D. Beefing up city supports for youth leaving the juvenile justice system

Most youth leaving the juvenile justice system—up to 80 percent by some estimates—return home to and live in cities. However, most cities currently pay little attention to ongoing supports for returning youth, leaving youth in the same challenging situations that initially contributed to their system involvement. Cities can productively tackle conceptual and practical aspects of the issues involved with connecting returning youth and their families with support, including by linking youth with supportive employment opportunities, ensuring returning youth have access to positive youth development services, and creating healthy, constructive neighborhoods in which youth can grow. Mayors interested in long-term public safety would likely see significant gains by investing in returning youth.

E. Continuing to replicate effective reform-oriented practices and procedures at the local level

Three factors contributed to early gains by participating cities during the technical assistance phase, suggesting the need for ongoing attention to these factors as other cities embrace a reform agenda. These factors include the consistency and dedication of the mayor’s staff charged with leading the project, attention to consistent engagement of key stakeholders throughout the project, and early engagement of all parties in assessing the need for reform and analyzing local data.

Conclusion

The participation of an initial group of cities in concerted efforts to lead juvenile justice reform produced a rich trove of lessons and experience in areas such as mayors’ ability to shift policy directions, improvement of decision making using additional data and partners, and areas for future attention by the juvenile justice field. Measurable outcomes stemming from changes introduced during the technical assistance period bear watching for proof of concept and evidence of success. So too does the “stickiness” of new means for cross-system collaboration invite further inquiry. Finally, ongoing evolutions in the state policy environment, which typically determines the broad strokes of juvenile justice structures and trends, may have a variety of effects worth noting, potentially rendering local reforms more apt or more difficult. The YEF Institute, for its part, looks forward to remaining a resource for city leaders alongside many others in the juvenile justice field, and to continuing to learn from local successes as well as challenges – both, in the interest of better outcomes for youth.

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