

# Positive Youth Justice Initiative Year 1 Evaluation - Appendix on Measuring Systems Change

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## Appendix A: Implementing and Measuring Systems Change

This section places PYJI in the context of systems-change initiatives by reviewing the literature on key components of system change and reform efforts. These represent many of the critical elements—and common challenges—in implementing large-scale systems change, and may provide some basis for comparison of the successes and challenges to date of PYJI in its four participating counties. These components also align with the key domains for evaluating system change implementation and outcomes, which will be discussed in the latter part of this section.<sup>1</sup>

It is also important to note that while literature on evaluating systems-change efforts exists, comprehensive evaluations of efforts to reform juvenile justice and child welfare systems are limited, highlighting the significance of this evaluation in contributing to the field.

### Key Components of Systems-Change Efforts

Based on a review of the evaluation literature, the sub-sections below discuss key components of effective systems change. These elements are organized in loose chronological order—recognizing that certain steps should occur before others can begin, while many occur simultaneously—with the understanding that each initiative and location has its own unique strengths and challenges that may inform the order in which steps occur and progress is made.

#### Ensuring Buy-In and Support for Change

The success of partnerships and collaboration between entities is largely driven by the individuals who lead and comprise the entities. Thus success is dependent on the extent to which staff support the philosophy of the initiative and believe the system changes are important and achievable. While support from all levels of staff is necessary to ensure the success of changes in agency practices, support from agency leadership is crucial, particularly at the beginning stages of planning and implementation. Agency leadership also play a key role in promoting the changes throughout the organization and garnering support from mid- and lower-level staff. As the efforts progress, the stability and longevity of involvement from government leadership is also a key factor in the success of interagency coordination.

#### Building Partnerships and Collaboration

The first essential step in transitioning toward a collaborative, integrated system is establishing partnerships among government and community-based agencies serving the target population, in this case crossover youth. Next, sources pointed to the need to formalize partnerships for system coordination as among the most essential measures for an initiative that cuts across and breaks down silos among agencies. Most sources recommend pursuing this step by creating new contracts, protocols, and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) to support partnerships and collaboration in pursuit of the initiative's goals.

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<sup>1</sup> A list of resources consulted for the literature review is included at the end of this report.

As partnerships solidify, initiatives may then focus on implementing shared decision-making structures, to ensure that entities are collaborating in their work and sharing the responsibility of making choices for the good of the initiative. Mechanisms may include developing structures for shared ownership and decision-making, such as taskforces that reflect a cross-section of system partners. As the coordination of multiple agencies and stakeholders is a key component of system-level change, many sources identified steps pertaining to developing a collaborative plan for what the changing system should look like, the creation and documentation of a shared vision, and the creation of a system map to document the path of clients through the service system.

Another key aspect of developing a collaborative systems-change initiative is partnering with stakeholders and the community, including obtaining stakeholder and community input in both planning and implementation, gathering feedback from community members throughout the process, and disseminating information about the initiative and services to stakeholders and community members.

### **Institutionalizing Changes through Policies, Procedures, and Contracts**

Literature on systemic change and cross-system integration highlights the importance of institutionalizing changes through actions such as creating policy frameworks supporting the proposed changes; creating or revising agency/department procedures and protocols; adapting agency job descriptions; and adapting language in agency contracts with service providers.

### **Developing Strong Data Systems and Information Sharing Practices**

Across the board, sources pointed to the creation of systems for data collection and sharing as one of the most important—and difficult—components of effective system integration. As systems and funders continue to place more and more emphasis on data-driven decision making, the ability of agencies to share both client-level and aggregate data is paramount. Key steps toward achieving this goal include the creation of data collection and sharing agreements and the implementation of an effective data sharing system (including purchasing new systems where necessary). Information sharing is also an area where many systems face significant challenges; given strict data privacy and confidentiality requirements and the existence of multiple electronic systems across agencies, the buy-in and resources necessary for this effort are high.

### **Ensuring Appropriate Staffing**

Given that agency staff and service providers are the ones responsible for putting changes into practice, ensuring appropriate staffing—including the necessary positions, numbers, and qualifications—is essential to the successful on-the-ground implementation of changes to agencies' procedures or programs. System-change efforts might include the creation of new staff positions, modification of staff roles and responsibilities, interagency staff co-location, and consolidated staff functions.

Staff training is also a key component of ensuring that staff are informed and prepared to carry out their new responsibilities. Trainings should cover new program models/approaches, as well as skill-building training for service providers. Literature on cross-system efforts recommends that agencies and

organizations carry out both internal and cross-agency staff trainings, noting that cross training is important for promoting coordination between staff from different systems.

### **Coordinating and Leveraging Resources**

Systems change experts and literature point to changes in the system's financing as a crucial step in moving toward a more coordinated system. In particular, they highlight the importance of integrating funding streams and leveraging resources from various sources including state and federal funds to strengthen cross-system coordination and promote long-term sustainability. Other activities related to financing include creating communication and marketing plans for funders, as well as a long-term financial planning that identifies potential funding sources.

### **Implementing and Improving Programs and Services**

The ultimate aim of any systemic reform is to benefit those for whom the systems have been designed. As such, at the heart of any systems-change effort is the provision of services that reflect its goals and principles, address issues of system coordination and access, and improve youth and family satisfaction with the system and services. Sources specified a number of potential actions related to programs and services, falling into two categories: 1) changes in services offered, such as new support services or increased use of best practices; and 2) changes in service delivery, such as the number of services provided, the number of clients served, and the service dosage.

### **Conducting Monitoring and Evaluation**

Once the systems for supporting change are falling into place, systems change initiatives often focus on tracking their progress towards their goals. Monitoring and evaluation creates an environment where effective programs are supported and sustained, allows for continuous improvement, and holds all parts of the system accountable for improved outcomes.

### **Measuring System Change**

One of the most challenging aspects of evaluation is identifying appropriate indicators of change: what does change look like, and how do you know if you have achieved it? For example, measuring the extent of collaboration is one of the most difficult outcomes to operationalize in practice, as collaboration requires not only administrative changes, but also changes in perceptions and levels of trust.

Evaluation best practices emphasize the importance of developing specific and quantifiable indicators to measure progress toward outcomes. Across the evaluation literature, sources note that to be useful and effective, performance measures should be specific, easy to understand, and unambiguous; measurable, with quantifiable targets; attainable within the project timeframe; relevant, logical, and expected to produce the intended outcome; and easy to collect and monitor regularly.

At the same time, an overly narrow focus on quantifiable measures does not allow for an exploration of the extent to which true systems transformation has occurred; MOUs may be signed and executed, but partners may not feel they are working together effectively. It is therefore essential to include measures

of both the *quantity* and the *quality* of the changes that have occurred. As such, in addition to quantifiable measures to assess *whether* and *how much* change has occurred, it is crucial to explore descriptive indicators of *how* changes have occurred, what they look like on the ground, and perceptions of the members of the *human systems*—the staff, providers, youth, and family members involved in and affected by efforts to transform the system of services for crossover youth.

Sierra Health Foundation and the RDA evaluation team worked together to create an evaluation design that includes both quantifiable performance measures, which will come largely from county data and progress reports, as well as descriptive measures, which will be gathered through RDA's survey, key informant interviews, and focus groups.