

Process Matters: Reflections from the Development of Harris County's Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund and Recommendations to Guide Future Efforts

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In 2019, local government officials in Harris County, Texas began to rethink their approach to youth justice. This process began a planning effort for a local Task Force charged with examining the current system and developing recommendations for moving forward. Prior to the Task Force's launch in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, forcing actors to rapidly change course. The public health crisis prompted a reorganization of youth justice priorities, as system stakeholders began looking for ways to move youth out of incarceration and the virus' path, and set the stage for the creation of a Youth Justice Reinvestment Fund.

Finding Opportunities in a Changing Landscape

In 2019, Harris County began exploring options to accelerate the shift toward a community-centered approach to youth justice. The County introduced the idea of a Task Force to guide this process and make recommendations. Although the Task Force was derailed by the CoVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, stakeholders harnessed the momentum from the planning effort to look at how youth currently in detention could be safely and effectively be supported in their own communities, without jeopardizing public safety. While community groups stepped up to assist those youth, this period of time revealed some of the challenges and gaps within the continuum, including a lack of needed services operated by grassroots and neighborhood-based providers in the most impacted communities and limited funding, catalyzing discussions about how to remedy these issues going forward.

Shifting Resources to Communities

After demonstrating that youth could be safely served in community-based alternatives at the height of the pandemic, there was significant interest in how to more systematically invest resources in communities. System stakeholders and members of the newly-created Youth Justice Reimagined Coalition began collaborating to establish a reinvestment fund. They looked at models nationwide, including Colorado's Community Reinvestment Initiatives, and also sought community input. To get the fund off the ground, the Probation department committed \$2 million from its budget, which was matched by County funds. At the County's February 2021 Commissioners' Court meeting, the Youth Justice Reinvestment Fund was officially approved and passed, following testimony from many Coalition members.

The Complexities of Partnering with Communities

Harris County encountered several challenges and barriers as it set up its reinvestment fund. Lack of understanding of county procurement rules meant that community groups that had been promised a role in the planning process could only be advisors, would not be compensated, and would not be

able to apply for funding themselves. These factors delayed the project, and to some, also constituted a breach of trust. Additionally, there were few applicants when the RFP was first issued, due to concerns over funding timelines. The county reissued the RFP, which provided time to do the needed outreach. In April 2022, Change Happens was selected as the intermediary organization.

Learning From Harris County To Inform Future Reinvestment Efforts: Recommendations For Implementation

- > Start with a clearly defined purpose and parameters, and a process driven by data, values, and that is community-informed;
- > Build in meaningful opportunities for youth and adult community members to help guide implementation;
- > Educate everyone involved or impacted by the fund about how it will operate and expected outcomes, and communicate successes, challenges and lessons learned in real-time;
- > Establish processes to measure, monitor, and evaluate the fund; and
- > Lay the groundwork for significantly scaling the fund beyond its pilot.

About Us

For more information about this report summary, please contact Vidhya Ananthakrishnan, Co-Director of Youth Justice Initiatives, at va2388@columbia.edu.

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