

Transition Activities and Services for Justice-Involved Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities

By Abeer Sikder | July 2022

Overview

Reentry and transition planning for justice-involved youth and young adults with and without disabilities should begin at intake and ideally involve multiple agencies and parties. On November 15, 2021, [the Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth \(CAPE-Youth\)](#) in collaboration with the [White House Office of Public Engagement](#), hosted a roundtable discussion on “Transition Activities and Services for Justice-Involved Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities.” The purpose of the roundtable was to better understand policy implications and lived experiences of justice-involved youth – and how that intersectional experience uniquely impacts access to employment, education and more. Based on the presentations at the roundtable, CAPE-Youth is drafting two detailed research briefs to help state and local policymakers implement comprehensive strategies for justice-involved youth and young adults with disabilities (Y&YAD).

Policy Considerations

State and local policymakers can improve assistance to justice-involved Y&YADs by implementing comprehensive support and services within the education, employment and justice systems. During the roundtable discussion with justice-involved youth, practitioners, policymakers and community leaders, three policy areas were identified:

- 1** | **Rehabilitation and recovery practices;**
- 2** | **Educational and economic access; and**
- 3** | **Youth and stakeholder engagement.**



Policy Area 1: Rehabilitation and Recovery Practices

States can support justice-involved Y&YADs by restructuring service delivery to emphasize individualized rehabilitation, timely interventions and specialized training for service providers. State agencies can also address specific issues (e.g., trauma and mental illness) that arise from or are exacerbated by contact with the justice system.

- **Strategy #1: Expanding Initial Screening.** Justice-involved Y&YADs may not receive necessary services when disabilities and needs are not identified and documented promptly during crucial transition periods.
 - Early screening can identify disabilities that often go unnoticed (i.e., non-apparent disabilities) and may not have been previously documented.
 - States and juvenile agencies can work with experts, such as social workers and mental health specialists, to build structural capacity to address the needs of individuals with disabilities and better identify youth who were not identified as having a disability prior to their justice system involvement.
 - **Strategy #2: Discontinuing Punitive Isolation Practices.** Long periods of isolation during incarceration can cause serious psychological, physical and developmental harm, resulting in persistent mental health conditions or even suicide.
 - States should consider utilizing alternative practices to keep youth engaged in recovery (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy) rather than using solitary confinement. These practices can increase self-awareness and accommodate common behavioral conditions that are adversely affected by isolation.
 - **Strategy #3: Developing Programming on Intersectional Identities.** Justice-involved Y&YADs with intersecting social identities (e.g., who belong to communities of color or who are experiencing homelessness) often encounter significant barriers to employment and education.
 - Individuals involved in multiple systems often need comprehensive and coordinated service delivery to support positive educational, employment and developmental outcomes.
 - States and juvenile justice agencies can implement intersectionality and cultural competency training to better equip practitioners to provide services to youth with intersectional identities.
 - **Strategy #4: Implementing Trauma-Informed Practices.** Unresolved trauma often impacts justice-involved Y&YADs and can affect their ability to trust others; cause long-term mental health conditions; disrupt education and employment; and mask invisible disabilities.
 - States and juvenile justice agencies can coordinate with healthcare providers to create trauma-informed systems that emphasize cultural sensitivity and interagency collaboration to holistically address the lived experiences of justice-involved Y&YADs and support positive long-term developmental outcomes.
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Policy Area 2: Educational and Economic Access

Justice-involved Y&YADs often require additional resources to succeed in education and employment. States can consider providing education services in non-traditional classroom settings (both during and after justice involvement) and coordinating with workforce systems to offer more opportunities for skills development and transition planning

- **Strategy #1: Supporting College Readiness.** States can help justice-involved Y&YADs better understand and access specialized academic resources from secondary and postsecondary agencies.
 - Postsecondary agencies can provide college counseling, financial support and wraparound services during the transition for Y&YADs. This can include assistance with the financial aid application process, which is often difficult for justice-involved youth to navigate on their own.
- **Strategy #2: Training Programs and Monetary Support.** Programs that train justice-involved Y&YADs can directly incentivize skills development for long-term employment outcomes.
 - To supplement work-based learning, justice agencies can establish both public and private partnerships that pay justice-involved Y&YADs entering the workforce.
 - “Earn to Learn” programs can be implemented in juvenile facilities and the community through professional networking, mentoring and apprenticeships.
 - Awarding program completion bonuses can further encourage retention.
- **Strategy #3: Limiting Barriers to Employment.** States can reduce procedural issues that often make employment difficult or impossible for justice-involved Y&YADs.
 - States can expand “Clean Slate” initiatives that clear criminal and juvenile records for individuals who stay crime-free.
 - States can implement Ban-the-Box initiatives and Fair Chance policies that prohibit employers from asking applicants about criminal history.
 - States can reduce licensing requirements (e.g., fees and years of experience) for specific fields to remove obstacles facing previously incarcerated individuals attempting to enter or reenter the workforce.
- **Strategy #4: Promoting Public-Sector Employment.** States can connect justice-involved Y&YADs to public-sector opportunities, which often offer more robust benefits and anti-discrimination protections.
 - States and justice agencies can create databases of public employers who specifically hire individuals with criminal or juvenile records.

Policy Area 3: Youth and Stakeholder Engagement

Y&YADs in the justice system can provide valuable feedback to improve services. Furthermore, involving stakeholders such as family and community members can establish positive relationships for Y&YADs to help them achieve their long-term personal and transition goals. State agencies can increase engagement with these groups to improve youth-oriented collaboration.

- **Strategy #1: Engaging Family and Community.** Justice agencies can better leverage relationships with family, friends and community members to assist youth in re-entry and transitioning from the justice system.
 - Engaging multiple stakeholders can promote a comprehensive approach to support social, cognitive, educational and career progress. It can also encourage youth to contribute to their communities and develop a sense of community, belonging and identity.
- **Strategy #2: Facilitating Youth-Led Planning and Development.** States can work with juvenile justice programs to empower Y&YADs through youth-led task forces, working groups and student-led Individualized Education Program meetings.
 - Justice-involved Y&YADs can use their personal experiences to inform initiatives that better serve those involved in the justice system.

Conclusion

Youth with disabilities are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. [Researchers estimate 30-60% of youth in correctional facilities have a disability](#)—whether physical, emotional, behavioral or intellectual. [These high percentages can increase the risk of adverse outcomes](#), including unemployment and recidivism.

By examining and incorporating policy considerations through restructured trauma-informed service delivery, training and technical assistance, family and community partnerships and inclusive policies, policymakers can better support justice-involved Y&YADs in their workforce and postsecondary transitions and enable youth to secure sustainable education and employment opportunities.

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