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Report shows implementation of COVID-19 prevention protocols also safely reduces number of Wisconsin youth in custody

MADISON, WI –

The COVID-19 pandemic created an urgent need for prevention protocols in secure facilities for youth.¹ The protocols limit the use of secure custody to only those youth who present a serious risk to public safety, in order to reduce the risk of transmission within facilities. It turns out, there aren't that many youth who pose that level of risk. Therefore, implementation of COVID-19 protocols has safely reduced the number of youth in custody and suggests we tend to rely on detention as a substitute for other, more effective, responses to youth in crisis.

This report [The Impact of COVID-19 on Youth Justice in Wisconsin: What Does it Tell Us About the Future of the System?](#) summarizes the statewide juvenile justice system's response to the pandemic, and its emphasis on restricting the use of secure custody. ***In the time period that was examined for this report, the number of referrals to county youth justice agencies fell by almost half of what they were in 2019.*** This finding points to a greater commitment to divert youth from the system -- a key factor if we are to succeed in reducing racial disparities in Wisconsin.

While these shifts in practice and procedure do not come without challenge, the data collected for this report shows that the majority of partners see these emergency measures as silver linings within a crisis. In a matter of months, jurisdictions have overcome hurdles that typically stymie efforts to decrease the use of confinement. Qualitative data indicates that most stakeholders are in support of this decrease to be sustained. Thus, this finding has positive implications for the future of our state.

"In short, this unprecedented crisis has forced our state to find alternatives so that secure custody is not used as a substitute for crisis intervention. This is more age appropriate, trauma informed

¹ <https://yclj.org/covid19statement>

and cost-effective," said **Erica Nelson, Advocacy Director for Kids Forward**. "This is a moment we should not waste."

"Children shouldn't be locked up because of a mental health crisis or an issue at home," states **Sharlen Moore, Executive Director of Youth Justice Milwaukee and Urban Underground**. "It is time to put resources behind the recommendations in this report to make them the new normal all across the state."

The report recommends taking actions that will convert this gain into a long term win. These steps include:

1. **Sustain the highest degree of collaboration and innovation** across underserved groups, government agencies, professional disciplines, and levels of government;
2. **Use more informal supports and technology** to keep youth connected and stable;
3. **Secure equitable funding and service coordination** to support all youth, in every community;
4. **Eliminate detention as a sanction** by engaging county level initiatives until the state statutes can be updated to reflect best practice.

The project reflects collaboration with a wide variety of partners including The Sentencing Project in Washington, DC. "Wisconsin has an opportunity to draw a new roadmap for reform. The pandemic makes clear what we should have known all along: too many kids are locked up for too long for no good reason. Disproportionally, those kids come from underserved communities of color. The pandemic will end, but Wisconsin's commitment to reform cannot,"- **Josh Rovner, Senior Advocacy Associate**.

The project was supported through a grant from the Governor's Juvenile Justice Commission (GJJC). **Jennifer Ginsburg, Chair of the GJJC**, states: "The Governor's Juvenile Justice Commission (GJJC) is proud to partner with Kids Forward in this statewide analysis of the COVID-19 impact on Wisconsin's youth justice system. The shifts in practice and protocols, highlighted in this report, align with best practices that are associated with improved outcomes."

Kids Forward has secured funding for a second phase of study focused on the factors related to diversion and what is needed to sustain this trend. According to **Ann McCullough, Youth Justice Wisconsin Project Director**: "The response to this project was overwhelmingly positive. Folks in Wisconsin are ready for change that is better for youth, families and communities. Why wouldn't we all pay attention to that?"

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About Kids Forward

Kids Forward advocates for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families in Wisconsin. Using research and a community-informed approach, Kids Forward works to help every kid, every family, and every community thrive.