

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/the-five-rs-to-improving-youth-outcomes-in-illinois>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last week, the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) held a press conference to unveil its strategic plan to make Illinois communities safer and improve outcomes for justice-involved youth. I was honored to join Ryan Shanahan, Veras Center on Youth Justice research director, and our government and project partners in presenting the plan.

Last fall, IDJJ Director Candice Jones enlisted Vera and the Chicago-based [Business and Professional People for the Public Interest](#) (BPI) with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to support the development of IDJJ's strategic plan. BPI and Vera spoke at the press conference to provide a national context on the importance of public and private partnerships to advance effective juvenile reform efforts.

During our two-month partnership, Vera and BPI conducted a series of interviews with Illinois juvenile justice system stakeholders: advocates, legislators, IDJJ staff, system-involved youth and their families that centered on the experiences of incarcerated youth and juvenile facility staff while drawing on the expertise of advocates, legislatures, and IDJJ executive staff.

Vera and BPI found consensus across all the stakeholders that the status quo for Illinois juvenile justice system is simply ineffective. We worked with BPI and IDJJ to reflect this consensus in the creation of [a strategic plan](#) for juvenile justice reform in Illinois, organized into five key reform areas with corresponding goals:

- 1) **Rightsize:** Reduce incarceration for low-risk youth by placing youth in secure facilities only when they pose a significant risk to public safety and when community-based treatment is not a viable option.
- 2) **Rehabilitate:** Improve programs to meet the needs of high-risk youth by ensuring that each IDJJ youth has an individualized support plan with access to a range of high-quality mental health and counseling services, along with an array of educational, vocational, and life-skills programming.
- 3) **Reintegrate:** Improve programs to ensure successful reentry by ensuring that youth released from IDJJ facilities receive the breadth of services, supports, and placements necessary to that help them successfully reenter the community and not return to IDJJ custody.
- 4) **Respect:** Create a safe and respectful environment for youth and staff by establishing an organizational culture and physical environment in each IDJJ facility that promotes care, respect, and positive youth development while ensuring the safety and well-being of all who live and work there.
- 5) **Report:** Increase transparency and accountability by enhancing IDJJ's communications and management information systems to strengthen operations, improve youth outcomes, increase safety, and more effectively inform stakeholders and the public.

Ryan and I also summarized the national landscape of juvenile justice reform with an eye towards positioning IDJJ's current and planned reform efforts within that framework, particularly with regard to IDJJ efforts to rightsize the juvenile justice system. During a panel discussion that closed out the press conference, Jones stressed that it is her hope that the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice will transform the juvenile justice system in Illinois into one that will serve as a model for states.

At the event, Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner announced his support for IDJJ's strategic plan and its goal of enhancing the state's current juvenile system. Rauner reminded the audience that Illinois is home to the first juvenile court in the country that recognized that youth are different from adults and need to once again become a leader on this issue.

Our work on this project occurred at an accelerated pace and was completed quickly. Its effectiveness was possible due to the highly collaborative manner leading to the creation of IDJJ's strategic plan which reflects the voices of the stakeholders who drive juvenile system reform in Illinois and the system-involved youth whom reform will impact.

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