

Closing the Youth Residential Treatment Center

October 2021

Background

For over two decades, Hennepin County's juvenile justice system has worked collaboratively to provide a continuum of services and interventions that effectively serve justice-involved youth and their families. Since 2005, interventions developed as part of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) have contributed to a 65 percent decrease in the average daily population of Hennepin County's Juvenile Detention Center (JDC). Increased funding for community-based, trauma-informed programming, coupled with the desire to keep youth in their homes and closer to their community supports, has led to less reliance on out-of-home placements: since 2017, the County has seen a 50 percent decrease in the number of youth in-placement.

Since opening in 1908, the Youth Residential Treatment Center (YRTC, formerly known as the County Home School) has provided a safe and secure environment for young people ages 13-20 to engage in therapeutic programming, as well as educational and vocational services. However, as the collective understanding of how best to serve justice-involved youth has evolved, so has the County's emphasis on a community-based array of services (CBAS) that prioritize the empowerment and rehabilitation of young people within their own communities.

The Decision to Close

The decision to close the YRTC came as both the region and the country has moved away from utilizing traditional residential treatment facilities, and towards more developmentally appropriate community-based alternatives. This move is grounded in a growing body of research that has shown community-based interventions for youth to be more effective at reducing future illegal activities than incarceration.¹

Since 2013, Hennepin County has examined alternatives to the YRTC, with the ultimate decision to close informed by four facts rooted in local realities:

- **Declining Use:** The success of various juvenile justice reform efforts throughout Hennepin County, including adherence to evidence-based practices and trauma-informed, culturally competent programming, has led to a

¹ Fabelo, T., N. Arrigona, M. D. Thompson, A. Clemens, and M. P. Marchbanks. 2015. "Closer to Home: An Analysis of the State and Local Impact of the Texas Juvenile Justice Reforms." New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center and The Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University; Ryon, Stephanie Bontrager, Kristin Winokur Early, Gregory Hand, and Steven Chapman. 2013. "Juvenile Justice Interventions: System Escalation and Effective Alternatives to Residential Placement." *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 52 (5): 358–75. doi: 10.1080/10509674.2013.801385.

significant decline in enrollment, from nearly 170 in 2014 to only 50 in 2020.² In 2021, it costs nearly \$26,000 a day to operate the YRTC, making this an ineffective use of County resources.

- **Outdated Facility:** The YRTC facility itself is in need of financial investment in order to make it more normative for the needs of youth and families. Cost estimates from a 2017 facility condition assessment indicated that more than \$30 million would be needed to sustain the existing campus.³ In the past decade, funds were allocated to maintain safety and security standards, but the significant investment needed to modernize the buildings does not align with the fiscal or programmatic goals of the County.
- **Increased Availability of Community-Based Services:** In the past decade, access to community-based services as alternatives to youth in-placement, in part due to the County's notable investment in these services, has expanded significantly, creating more opportunities for young people to be served in their own communities. Since 2020, services tailored to the specific needs of youth experiencing trauma, at risk for sexual exploitation, in need of domestic abuse interventions, violence interruption and culturally responsive resource navigation have been added to the County's array of services.
- **Community Input:** Through numerous community meetings and focus groups, County residents were clear about their desire to prioritize the use of community-based alternatives to juvenile justice, and their lack of support for any upgrading or ongoing use of the YRTC.

The Plan for Alternative Services

The decision to close the YRTC has opened opportunities for Hennepin County to invest in the community-based interventions most impactful for young people, and most responsive to the needs of the community. For years, Hennepin County has cultivated a diverse pool of community services that focus on the promotion of public safety through less restrictive and evidence-based practices of juvenile justice. Throughout the transition to close the YRTC, alternatives that best supported a path towards successful return to the community were made available to youth in-placement. Additional services are also offered to youth awaiting placement or release from the JDC, providing these young people with quality interventions focused on skill development through direct practice and positive reinforcement.

Feedback collected from former clients and families has assisted the County in efforts to identify and reinvest in the alternative services that have been most impactful on the lives of justice-involved youth. In addition to investing in CBAS, Hennepin County continues to access existing treatment options throughout the state and identify new partnerships within this space for youth most in need of out-of-home placements.

Conclusion

As our understanding of juvenile justice and rehabilitation evolves, so must the interventions we provide to this population. While we recognize the closure of the YRTC removes a beneficial and trusted out-of-home placement option, DOCCR remains steadfast in this decision, and committed to ensuring alternatives that are effective, community-led and supported, and ultimately valued by all juvenile justice partners.

² Hennepin County's Community Corrections and Rehabilitation Data Portal: <https://www.hennepin.us/residents/public-safety/dashboard>

³ Hennepin County Home School Facility Condition Assessment, December 2017.