

What Youth Want:

The Essential Components of
Successful Community-Based
Alternatives to Carceral Systems

Lauren Fine, Esq. *Stoneleigh Visiting Fellow 2022-2023*

Philadelphia’s juvenile justice system is in crisis.

The current failed response to detention overcrowding and lack of services—a response grounded in the language of crisis—is also an opportunity to transform the system.

Momentum for change is building, but too often, conversations about reform exclude those who have had the most direct and personal experience with the system. As last year’s Stoneleigh Visiting Fellow, I focused on the perspectives of young people with lived experience with Philadelphia’s juvenile justice system, and their views about transforming that system and alternatives to incarceration for youth.

This report provides a summary of my conversations with a small group of young adults (aged 18-24) who convened regularly for more than six months, both in-person and virtually. These meetings served as focus groups, and brainstorming and planning sessions. In between, I also had conversations with individual participants, which allowed us to explore themes from the group meetings in greater depth.

Together we engaged in experiential learning through Participatory Action Research (PAR), employing young people who personally came in contact with the justice system to obtain community-level data to reform the system and, specifically, to promote alternatives to incarceration for youth.

The goal of these conversations and this report are to begin to understand what works and what does not in existing juvenile justice programs, and what youth see as essential components and prerequisites for successful alternative approaches to incarceration. Here, I summarize the major themes, which are described more fully in the report:

1. Young people believe that incarceration is harmful and that traditional punishment mechanisms are counterproductive. Despite its charge¹ to further accountability and rehabilitation, our current juvenile justice system does not do enough of either, nor does it prioritize restoration or healing. As one youth explained: ***“the system is not here to help you...it’s not really here to support you into being a better person...They’re really just trying to punish people for what they did. Throwing someone away for years isn’t going to help solve what they’ve done. Because, at the end of the day... I don’t think they ever helped me think about accountability.”*** Youth described wanting others to understand that programs should help young people ***“correct their ways and take accountability for their actions,”*** but also that ***“accountability doesn’t always have to be in the form of discipline.”***

2. Young people believe that youth who commit harm, and the communities where they live, are better served by referring young people to supportive, resource-intensive, community-based programs. These programs do not seek to punish youth for their mistakes or to “fix” them. Instead, they focus on restoration and the wellbeing of youth and, by extension, the safety of the community. This report focuses on the elements of quality programs, as described by the participating young people. These include: adult staff who are respectful and genuinely care for their wellbeing, are motivated and engaging, and who are invested in their goals; transparent and consistent program policies; individualized case management and referrals to social and health services, including high quality therapeutic services; welcoming physical spaces; opportunities for experiential learning and growth; and training and education opportunities that provide pathways towards stable, living-wage employment in the community.

3. While young people want a more expansive, supportive and productive set of options in response to harm caused by minors, they do not intend for community-based programs to serve as a justification for criminal-legal net-widening. Together, we call for an increased scope of alternatives to criminal legal involvement and more opportunities for diversion, not a broader array of coercive, required programming options.

¹ Pennsylvania’s Juvenile Justice system exists “to provide for children committing delinquent acts programs of supervision, care and rehabilitation which provide balanced attention to the protection of the community, the imposition of accountability for offenses committed and the development of competencies to enable children to become responsible and productive members of the community.” Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judges Commission, available at: <https://www.jcjc.pa.gov/Balanced-Restorative-Mission/Pages/default.aspx>.

Youth Speak: What Works

What young people are seeking is simple:

- Adults who genuinely care about them, their wellbeing and their goals and dreams.
- Curated guidance from a trusted partner who can connect them to an individualized array of services across issue areas like housing, healthcare, education and legal support.
- A physical space that is safe, welcoming, clean and youth-friendly.
- Ample and desirable food provided at each session, and transportation to and from the program site or money to pay for transportation.
- Program staff who are motivated, friendly and welcoming.
- Program staff who speak respectfully, do not demean, do not yell and do not use physical force. Instead, youth desire staff who use positive youth development tools to relate to and motivate them.

- Program staff who are “credible messengers.”
- Transparency and consistency in the enforcement of rules.
- Therapy. Real, actual therapy with trained clinicians who respect confidentiality.
- Program components and activities that seek to meet youth where they are and connect with their interests.
- Opportunities to learn and grow in experiential ways and to learn about career options and pathways.
- Opportunities to take on leadership roles, to be trusted and to grow.
- Opportunities to earn money while gaining knowledge and skills that will enable them to obtain living-wage employment in their communities.

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Lauren Fine, Esq., *Stoneleigh Visiting Fellow 2022-2023*²

Philadelphia's juvenile justice system is in crisis.

Our detention center is ***overcrowded, dangerous,*** and ***ill-equipped*** to address the needs of youth and respond effectively to the root causes that push young people into contact with the juvenile justice system. Many residential juvenile placements and other court-mandated programs across the state that Philadelphia formerly sent youth to have been closed after enduring abuse and cover-ups were exposed and verified.³

The current failed response to detention overcrowding and lack of services—a response grounded in the language of crisis—is also an opportunity to transform the system.

² This paper was written with research support from Ruth Shefner, MPH, MSW, PhD(c).

³ The well-documented abuse at residential carceral settings across Pennsylvania, for example, has led to the closure of programs for being ***unsafe*** and for ***not meeting young people's, or the community's needs.***

We again are hearing calls for alternatives to incarceration. These calls are justified. They also are just. However, as momentum builds to pursue a different future, it is important to recognize whose voices are being heard and amplified—and whose are not. Traditionally, there have been too few avenues for the individuals most directly impacted by harmful policies to be involved in the conversations convened to correct them. As last year’s *Stoneleigh Visiting Fellow*, my goal was to address this deficit in opportunity and facilitate at least one more avenue for young people with lived experience of the justice system to reflect on the status quo and envision new policy and programming frameworks for youth in Philadelphia. This work positions young people as active participants in imagining a different paradigm.

During my fellowship, I had the privilege of talking extensively with young people⁴ who had been incarcerated in Philadelphia and to learn about their interactions with the justice system. Their views are solutions. The ensuing summary of their thoughts offers a potential pathway forward in this work.

The young people involved in this project are the experts in their own experiences, and in the ways that the system has harmed them, their families and communities.

They are in different stages of court involvement and “reentry.” They also are experts in what characterizes a good program: the components, the people, the goals and the ethos. Also, intimately, they know what makes a program ineffective. This paper—an introduction to my Stoneleigh Visiting Fellowship Project—provides a snapshot of what they have shared. It is not a data-dive, nor does it review budgets or summarize prior literature. Instead, this paper is meant to serve as a megaphone for the insights of young people. They are ready to help as Philadelphia works to improve its institutional response when youth commit harm.

⁴ This discussion uses the terms “system-involved young people” and “young people” and “youth” interchangeably to refer to those who came in contact with the juvenile and/or adult justice systems when they were under the age of 18.

Methodology

The approach used for this research prioritizes the lived experiences of those who have been impacted by the system. The voices of young people must be central to any conversations about reimagining juvenile justice. To this end, I recruited a group of young adults who were incarcerated as children to share their experiences with community-based programs that serve Philadelphia youth. To help Philadelphia implement a robust array of community-based alternatives to incarceration, we focused our discussions on the elements of community programming that work well and those that work less well for justice-involved youth.

We met monthly as a group for half a year, and we had individual conversations in between the group meetings. The participants were paid \$50/hour for their time and expertise. They were also provided additional funding to cover travel expenses for in-person meetings. Food was always served, with enough for them to take home abundant leftovers. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old, and their involvement with the criminal legal system was varied. Their age at first contact with the system ranged from 11 to 17 years old.

What Young People Are Seeking:

During focus groups and individual meetings, young people reflected on their contacts with the justice system and community-based programs, their current and past needs, and the ineffectiveness of carceral settings to address harm. Individually, and as a group, they also explored what would make better alternatives to carceral placements, and envisioned how these alternatives could improve both young people's experiences and community safety more broadly. They shared insights about what makes programming positive, or not. Indeed, they said that every aspect of a program's organization and pedagogy impacts its efficacy. Ideas related to program staffing and culture occupied the bulk of the group's energy and attention.

None of what was said is revolutionary. It is not complicated or new. In fact, the young people's observations are heartbreakingly simple. This is an effort, once again, to envision a system that listens to young people, centers

their perspectives and, above all, prioritizes their safety, care, growth and development. The following categories and descriptions collectively imagine a system that is not oriented around punishment and instead prioritizes individual and community wellness and healing.

Staffing:

1. Caring Adults:

Young people seek relationships with caring adults who demonstrate authentic investment in their wellbeing and who are genuinely curious about their interests, invested in their success, and committed to helping them explore opportunities for their future. They seek this in the context of general community-based programs and, especially, in the more formal relationships they hold with adult employees of programs to which the court has mandated their participation. They seek ***“people that are full of life. Positive people. Enthusiastic people. Caring people.”***

They are drawn to programs where staff ***“genuinely care about you, want to help people and are supportive,”*** because it matters when ***“people actually love their job and actually want to be there to help you. You can feel when someone actually wants to help you.”***

Program staff who invest in building relationships with young people are essential. They remind young people that they have value.

More than anything else, engaged and invested adults make young people feel safe, and they are the biggest factor in ensuring a program is effective. Young people want opportunities to feel supported in exploring their curiosity and creativity.

Staff attitudes towards young people can increase youth engagement in programming and enhance public safety. When staff are engaged and invested, they connect with young people on a level that gets to the root causes of why they became justice-involved in the first place. While this is a reality that has been asserted again and again—by researchers, by advocates, and

especially by young people—the insights and anecdotes we have collected make clear that it is by-and-large still not delivered in justice-mandated programs.

2. Curated Connection to Other Services:

Young people respond to adults who see them as human beings, with needs, challenges, goals and dreams, and who invest in them accordingly. As one young person described, programs are successful when they hire staff who ***“want to make sure whatever you need is met...people who enjoy their job. You can feel their energy, and you can feel that it is a safe space for you.”*** Another young person similarly described being drawn to programs where staff are, ***“really genuine people. That’s what made me want to be in that program. Because, they actually genuinely want to help you succeed in whatever you want to do with yourself.”***

Anecdotal experience and academic research confirm how critical it is for programs that serve justice-involved young people to be able to support participants across an array of interests and needs. This includes ensuring they have access to stable housing, civil legal services, and physical and behavioral healthcare. This does not mean that programs need to become service providers across different domains, but it does require that they develop and maintain connections with organizations that provide other supports for youth, to connect with as needed. This enables one organization to serve as a hub, making connections so that a constellation of programs can provide wraparound support in aggregate. Simply providing one service to young people who come in contact with the justice system and ignoring the larger circumstances in which they live is insufficient, and ineffective.

3. Civility and Respectful Communication:

In addition to staff who are caring and who take interest in young people as full people, youth want staff to treat and talk to them with respect. At the outset, they want to be greeted by staff who are friendly and welcoming. They want staff to check in with them about their wellbeing and to demonstrate a trauma-informed understanding of their experiences. As one young person explained, ***“when you come in, it matters how you’re***

greeted. Like, hey, how are you?...a quick check-in, temperature or mood check, to see how you're feeling. Because you might be arriving to a place a little upset." Another young person extolled the impact of feeling valued in a program, as evidenced by a greeting from staff, sharing,

"Every time I walked into the program, they greeted us. They were always happier to see us than we were happy to see them, which mattered, especially coming from a home where you don't get that much support."

This seemingly simple practice, *"provides the atmosphere for kids to feel safe, and makes them feel like you actually want them to be there, and you [the staff] want to be there too."*

Staff who actively disrespect young people—perhaps because of lack of adequate training, lack of cultural competency, lack of motivation, or some combination thereof—have a profoundly negative impact on youth and programming environments. Young people react especially poorly to being yelled at by program staff; it signals that staff, *"don't respect me as a person if you've got to raise your tone to get at what you're saying. Why can't you be civilized and communicate whatever you're trying to communicate? If someone yells at me, I'm going to ignore them. I want the same respect you expect from me. Don't treat me any less."* Another young person similarly described that being yelled at conveys that staff consider him to be less than human: *If someone is yelling at me, that rubs me wrong...you yell at dogs [so it] makes me feel like less of a person when you yell at me; it hurts my feelings."* Beyond hurting youth's feelings, staff yelling can actually create unsafe environments for youth in their care. As a young person explained, *"when staff yell, it causes a lot of people to snap out, try to fight, [thereby causing danger]."*

Young people want adults to treat them with civility (in contrast to the way they report being treated in placement. Youth describe staff in placement as creating a "dictatorship."). Relatedly, again and again, youth describe feeling discouraged when they sensed that program staff were there *"just there for a*

paycheck.” Instead, they seek relationships with adults who are dependable and who *“can give you a sense of—they care about me. Knowing that they care about you, knowing that you can depend on them, I feel like that’s really important. Being reliable also builds trust in the relationship.”*

4. Credible Messengers

In addition to seeking care and respectful communication from program staff, youth who come in contact with the justice system respond best to adults to whom they can relate. They seek people who understand their life experiences, their communities and their challenges—adults who embrace them. At minimum, they seek adults who are not visibly afraid of them. Among the most effective adults are “credible messengers,” who have experienced similar things in similar neighborhoods. As one young person shared,

“Seeing someone come from the streets, come from the same place, same area that I come from, dealing with the same stuff, transition from selling drugs to running a profitable legal business, he’s showing us the way....He was able to show me a better route, while also making money from it...He helped reprogram our brains from what we saw.”

Other youth note that programs that value peer mentorship can land especially well with young people: *“They really respect the people who are around them...When I as a peer mentor talk to other young people, I’m chatting and they can enjoy it, versus talking to someone with a different life experience.”* Youth are clear that it is not essential that program staff be credible messengers (*“what matters is that you’re caring”*), but that having the baseline commonality can help.

Physical Space and Resources

5. Physical Space that is Safe, Welcoming, Clean and Youth-Friendly:

In addition to feeling welcomed and supported by the people who staff a program, the physical setting plays an important role in a program's effectiveness. From the initial contact point of entering into a program, youth want to feel safe, and respected. This relates to both the signaling done by the location and the condition of the physical space.

a. Safety

Safety⁵ matters. Young people ***“want to feel comfortable”*** attending a program, and this means the program location should be in an area where violence is not prevalent. Young people react negatively to neighborhood-based program locations in areas where young people are known to be in conflict with one another (***“the city doesn't realize why no one is coming to these programs. People are beefing with each other in those areas. It's not safe.”***). Instead, they think programs should be located in central locations like Broad Street (***“even if people are beefing on either side, no one is beefing with Broad Street”***) or Center City (***“no one is beefing with Center City.”***). In general they feel safer attending programs in well-lit locations where “everyone knows there's no beef,” and where there isn't widely accepted or known to be drug activities on street corners (***“9 times out of 10 if someone is on the corner, it's bad”*** and ***“if they're standing on the corner, they're into something”***). While locating programs away from the neighborhoods where young people live also poses potential accessibility challenges regarding transportation, youth believe that young ***“people have to have options for going to different programs in different parts of the city...having options is definitely important.”***

Young people emphatically believe that programs should have a no-gun policy. They do not want this to be enforced by metal detectors, however, which they consider a violation of a foundational principle of trust (***“people want to feel secure, and they want to feel trusted;”*** ***“metal detectors push youth***

⁵ We apply the definition of safety offered by Full Frame Initiative, which is “the degree to which we can be our authentic selves and not be at heightened risk of physical or emotional harm.” Available at:

<https://www.fullframeinitiative.org/learn/our-core-concepts/all-of-us-are-hardwired-for-wellbeing/>.

away”). Instead, young people want program staff to control who has access to the physical space, through the use of key cards or checking in with a security person. These measures also have an emotional benefit. They “***make you feel like you’re part of something;***” and say to a participant, “***I matter.***” As one young person said, “***it feels good walking into a building with fancy elevators. It just feels good. It makes you feel wanted.***” Both for the physical safety and the signaling they provide, mechanisms like these are important.

In addition, young people say, the physical characteristics of a facility demonstrate respect and safety, or lack thereof. A space need not be fancy, but cleanliness matters. Young people said that they respond well to programs that operate in “***a place that looks and feels comfortable,***” and is “***beautiful and inviting.***” Every young person described attending programs that were dirty, and said that the lack of basic cleanliness signified disrespect for them as human beings. Conversely, a well-kept space “***shows that important things happen here. The way it looks signifies that business happens here.***”

Young people want programs to have security cameras inside, covering all areas where participants or staff might go. They are familiar with the abuse that has happened at residential and other court-mandated programs for justice-involved youth, and some intimately so. Because of this, they fear that without cameras capturing what happens inside a program, they could be subject to physical abuse by staff, or they could be held liable if any type of altercation happens on premises.

“Cameras are protective. Not that abuse or misbehavior by staff is what we expect, but if something happens, we have nothing to explain if it is something we didn't see... if the police come, even if something as simple as a fight...if there are no cameras, they can't see what really happened.”

Heartbreakingly, justice-involved young people are conditioned to be concerned about staff behaving badly (“***We need surveillance cameras to catch the staff; it’s about our safety, to know there is someone actually monitoring us...maybe something happens, maybe you’re wondering why a young person stopped coming to your program?***”). Young people view security cameras as an essential safety mechanism. They are clear: ***“don’t put the cameras in expecting something to happen, but do it just in case.”***⁶

b. Food and Transportation:

Food, too, is essential. As one young person said, ***“providing food is important. A lot of kids don’t get nice food at home.”*** Said another: ***“some people don’t eat at home. Or, they might not have the money to eat later that day. So, food might help some people, or might help people save some money, so they can achieve their goal—later on this month, make rent, etc. so that food might help them.”*** In addition to easing financial stresses, providing quality food also helps young people stay engaged when they arrive. Full stomachs better enable participants to focus on the programming, and meals draw them to participate, which can be critical at the outset when a program’s substance has not yet won over a skeptical participant (***“Food plays a big part; even if people don’t come for nothing else, they’ll come for the food.”***).

In a similar vein, providing transportation or money for transportation removes barriers to youth participation. In reflecting on what kept them from participating in programs before their involvement with the justice system, young people consistently raised access to transportation and the associated costs as impediments to their participation. Young people seek programs that are “transit accessible” and want to be reimbursed for travel costs.

These program components are critical to ensuring that young people will show up and that they show up as their full selves. This is critical not just to participation, but to meaningful participation.

⁶ Cameras obviously raise other questions and potentially unintended surveillance consequences, which are not within the scope of this discussion

Program Components

6. Meeting Youth Where They Are:

Young people say that justice-mandated programs meet their needs when they focus on personal development in a culturally-competent way and center activities that are **“based around stuff that young people [are] into.”** They speak highly of programs and adults that **“keep kids engaged,”** connect with them around existing interests and **“provide opportunities for kids to express themselves.”** One young person shared a recognition that,

“Kids are still developing, [and want a] program that focuses on the development of the child, how they are growing up, and that allows them to do something they love—something where they feel they can make a statement about themselves. When you keep kids engaged, it keeps them looking forward to the future, and gives them something to do so they can stay out of the streets and all the bad stuff going on in Philly.”

Relatedly, youth respond to staff and programs that **“aim for their growth”** and encourage them to explore their interests further. One young person explained that, **“kids maybe spray paint because they think that’s their only canvas. So maybe instead of a spray can, they’re using a paint brush. I know kids where, looking at them, you wouldn’t know they have that kind of talent. But once you give them the opportunity, they have all sorts of abilities. When given the opportunity, they took advantage of it and are creating their own things.”** Existing court-mandated programs do this when they translate interests into skills, credentials, and concrete pathways for future employment or enrichment (**“I left there with some certifications, I learned how to make beats there. The activities wasn’t just any activities; they were based around stuff that young people are into. For example, music is a big influence right now, and they put that in there.”**).

Young people seek opportunities to learn and grow in experiential ways and to learn about career options and ways to pursue them. They want to understand what pathways exist for their future, so they can contribute to their family and to their community financially while doing something they love in a place where they feel appreciated (***"they would plug us in to different people around the country, to plug us in and give us knowledge on that, on how to start our own, you know, whatever we want to do with our life. And that was just so helpful, because that happened when I was in maybe sophomore year of high school, so it makes us want to think about what we want to do with ourselves. For them to actually help plug us in, with stuff that was going to help us...they pay for everything, just for you to learn about your goals, and that's very powerful, because a lot of these young people really need that, because it gives them a start in school, instead of them finishing high school and then, 'oh what do I want to do with myself?'"***).

7. Allowing Young People to Lead:

System-involved youth want to be trusted and offered pathways to demonstrate their leadership. One young person described a positive programmatic experience that gave him the opportunity to take initiative and act as a leader (***"It was fun because it was like a leadership role. And who doesn't want to be a leader at the end of the day? So I'll take that. Being the one that's making all the phone calls, hosting presentations by myself, I put that suit on and all that, it was fun...It was something different, it helped me with my communication skills"***). Providing opportunities for young people to invest in the program, and show that the program invests in them, fosters their commitment to the program and to their community.

Far too often, leadership opportunities are provided in the streets, but not in other spaces in young people's lives. Allowing young people to be leaders is powerful. It makes them feel powerful. People who don't feel powerful are more likely to seek power in negative ways (in its most extreme form, by picking up a gun). Programs that allow young people to make decisions and invest in themselves are effective in serving individuals and, by extension, the safety of the community at large.

8. Financial Support

System-involved young people want, and need, opportunities that enable them to earn money. At minimum, they want to enter a pathway that will result in financial opportunity (***“We’re learning and benefiting at the same time”***). The relationship between poverty and involvement in the justice system is well established. Most of the youth described growing up in homes and communities with limited access to financial resources. As such, unpaid programming presented significant barriers and opportunity costs that could feel prohibitive to participation. During reentry, unpaid programs could, in fact, feel like additional punishment.

Conversely, programs that provide even small stipends or, better yet, hourly wages, are much more likely to attract young people who otherwise may be disenfranchised, disconnected and/or involved in the justice system. Many Philadelphia youth simply can’t afford to participate in programs, even if they are free. The pressure to make financial contributions to their families’ survival is simply too great. As one young person put it, ***“If I did programs that paid me, I wouldn’t have looked for jobs, I wouldn’t have dropped out of school. But instead, I did drop out of school, and that’s when I got locked up.”*** This is especially resonant for young people who have a record and face barriers to employment. After being saddled with a juvenile felony conviction,

“I applied to at least 150 jobs and none of them got back to me, because I had a background. Imagine if [a community organization] didn't offer me that job. What was I supposed to turn to? I would have turned to other things that are getting other people locked up, because I didn't have a job.”

As with so many other aspects of the system, the linkage between poverty and crime here is clear.

Beyond living wages for the time spent in programs, youth also spoke extensively about the power of incentives, both as a form of compensation and

as a psychological tool. One participant noted that incentives are ***“like a push to push you.”*** They help youth dedicate themselves to a program, ***“give youth something to look forward to”*** and that ***“even if it's not money, but just to give them something to work towards.”*** Another young person discussed the power of incentives to change behavior, explaining that ***“even if they're doing it because of the incentives, not because they want it, subconsciously they're still learning and taking something away from it. It's part of your schedule, part of your everyday life. You may not think you're taking the skills you're learning at the program, but you may come back and you may be talking differently or dealing with situations differently.”*** He continued, ***“for the young people out there just stealing cars and robbing people, say they come in just for the incentives. Now they're getting so used to coming there, thinking they're just there for that. But really, now they're so used to coming there, they're not even thinking about going to rob someone anymore.”***

9. Procedural Justice:

Young people respond to **procedural justice**—a fair process, being treated with dignity and respect and transparency in rules and their enforcement. Young people perceive programs as treating them fairly when staff are clear about expectations and apply them equally across demographics. In contrast, when young people perceive arbitrariness or inconsistency in treatment, it engenders distrust, which makes programs ineffective and unsafe. In this way, community-based programs have an opportunity to set a culture that contrasts with how youth are treated in carceral settings. As one young person shared,

“Some staff in every facility—adult, juvenile, placement, holding facilities—have this thing, this favoritism thing. They let some people do certain stuff, but they might not let somebody else do the same. The staff will get mad or a guard will get mad at an inmate, and get another person that's incarcerated to harm the other person. It's corrupt.”

10. Therapy:

Programs that offer therapy are especially valued by young people. A consistent theme among young people's experiences was the importance of therapy and the lack of culturally-competent and clinically-appropriate therapeutic treatment offered to them in their community. In court-mandated programming, young people said there is an appetite for more therapeutic options and a lack of corresponding availability. They described this desire as being particularly strong in the wake of their experiences in residential or carceral institutions, which often purported to offer therapy but rarely actually did. One young person described how she spent six months officially requesting therapy ("putting in slips for it"). Once she was finally able to talk to the person the placement called a therapist, that person then **"would tell certain things to other staff, or the person in charge of the placement."** Several youth described seeking **"a safe space to talk about things"** while in a court-mandated program and not having that need met. Indeed, youth see early, high-quality, therapeutic intervention as potentially transformational. When asked what could have prevented him from becoming system-involved, one young person said:

"Therapy. I always felt like I was muted out. Like there was no one listening, no one hearing me. It created anger inside me. As a young adult in my twenties, I'm kind of getting over it now. But when I'm talking to someone and they're not responding, it triggers that anger from growing up that I never addressed. When I was young, I stopped talking to people, just held it in. Eventually it came out. That's how I ended up in the system."

Young people seek culturally-competent and respectful therapists, who are able to tailor the services to the person's particular needs, interests and style.

For example, youth point to art therapy as a format that ***“helps get over the barrier of not feeling comfortable sitting and talking to someone.”*** One young person described art therapy as an alternative that ***“a lot of young people can gravitate towards. Art therapy is incorporating art into the therapy, not just sitting there talking to someone. Different sessions incorporate artistic expression into what you're saying. Both the therapist and the young person do art together.”*** Youth who come in contact with the justice system want ways to process the harm they have caused and have experienced. Community-based programs that offer, but do not require, therapeutic options—or connection to outside providers that offer culturally-competent services—are fundamental to successfully serving justice-involved youth. Finally, a desire for very basic confidentiality in a therapeutic relationship—a criteria that cannot be assumed, given youth's experiences in carceral therapy—was universal among the system-involved young people in the group.

Conclusion

When allowed to envision what they need and want, young people have answers. They reflect powerfully on their experiences with a system that signaled—in myriad ways—that it did not value them as human beings or prioritize investing in helping them achieve their goals and dreams. And, they are clear about what draws them into, and keeps them connected with, positive, community-based programming.

While Philadelphia has made great strides in recent years by expanding the roster of community programs available when young people are arrested, there are not enough programs or opportunities that center participants as human beings. Too often, young people feel like they are just a list of characteristics to be “fixed.” Programs that demonstrate a positive-youth-development orientation are the most effective. They allow young people to show up authentically, to try new things, and to figure out who they are and want to become. They unlock pathways that enable young people to have

choices that do not lead them back to the justice system. Young people are an essential, and oft-overlooked, constituency in evaluating program effectiveness.

The elements of high-quality programming described by youth in this paper formed the basis for the next steps in our collective process. Next, youth created the accompanying rubric for analyzing existing programs based on these elements. The hope is that young people will use that rubric to assess programs currently operating in Philadelphia.

Our ultimate goal is to offer a menu of community-based alternatives to incarceration that have not previously been offered when a young person comes into contact with the system. We have taken an important first step in this journey: We have defined what makes a program “good” from the perspective of those who will use it.

The young people have spoken. Will we listen?