

Moving Beyond the County Home School

A Proposal for Reinvestment in our Youth
and Communities.

Content of this proposal was visioned and developed by
Hennepin County community members, gathered and compiled
by members of the Minnesota Coalition for Youth Justice.



MN Coalition for
Youth Justice

About Us

The Minnesota Coalition for Youth Justice works to bring together diverse community members and organizations advocating for youth justice. We believe that transformational change is imperative for Minnesota youth to access justice that is led with equity and love, rooted in humanity, and responsive to the strengths and needs of youth, families, and communities.

To ensure equitable outcomes for all youth, the Minnesota Coalition for Youth Justice advocates for policies, practices and programs that reduce racial and ethnic disparities, treat youth and families with dignity, and are informed by anti-racist and culturally sound frameworks. Formed in 2019, we work on state- and county-level policy and practice change.

About This Proposal

With the closure of the county home school, our coalition recognizes the unique opportunity that Hennepin County has to radically reimagine its approach to youth justice. Since the decision to close the home school was made public in the Summer of 2021, our coalition has worked to organize four formal visioning sessions and numerous community conversations with the goal of creating a community-driven proposal for the supports and opportunities we'd like to see in place for youth. We've met with members of the general public and youth from across the county, including youth directly impacted by the Hennepin County youth justice system. The ideas in this document were gathered, analyzed, and written by community members who believe that with the right investment, we can support our youth in our communities, rather than incarcerating them. This document was created in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, George Floyd's murder, and a recent spike in gun-related youth violence. It is our belief that by using this opportunity to radically re-imagine the county's approach to youth justice, we can meet dual aims of community safety and wellbeing and effective individual youth support.

Our Principles and Beliefs

The approach to youth justice and community safety outlined here is premised on the following beliefs:

- We believe that all young people are inherently brilliant.
- We believe in keeping youth in our communities and bringing support to them.
- We believe that our communities are capable of taking care of our youth.
- We believe that youth incarceration is not the solution.
- We value the voice of youth in decision making, especially in the decisions that impact their lives.
- We believe that adults are responsible for supporting youth to develop the tools they need in order to make the best decisions they can.
- We believe in being proactive, as much as possible.
- We believe in addressing harm in a way that does not create more harm.

We see significant overlap between our guiding principles and Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation's statement of values related to its community based array of services, in which the Department says they will:

- Improve the health and well-being of the youth we serve
- Provide resources that are trauma informed, culturally sensitive and competent
- Foster community partnerships that are user friendly, convenient, and in close proximity to a youth's community
- Monitor interventions for proven effectiveness and ability to provide outcomes (Benson, et. al. 2021).

As a community, we demand that Hennepin County live up to these values.

The Current State of Youth Justice in Hennepin County

The decision to close the Hennepin County Home School is situated within the context of reductions in the use of correctional out of home placements, renewed efforts to address racial inequities within the county, and years of research on the ineffectiveness of out of home placements as an intervention. A few data points highlighting this are:

- Downward trends in youth incarceration: At the end of 2016, there were 169 youth in out of home placements. At the end of Quarter 3 of 2021, there were 44 youth in out of home placements. This is a 74% decrease (Hennepin County Out of Home Placement Dashboard).
- Racial disparities persist: At the end of Quarter 1 of 2021, 86% of boys in out of home placements were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Out-of-Home Placement Trends: Q1 2021), while data from the Census shows that only 25.8% of Hennepin County's overall population is BIPOC (US Census Bureau, 2019).
- The County Home School is under capacity: Sitting on 167 acres in Minnetonka, data indicates that there are currently 4 youth at the County Home School (Hennepin County Out of Home Placement Dashboard). At the end of Quarter 1 of 2021, there were 13 youth there (Out-of-Home Placement Trends: Q1 2021).
- Hennepin County acknowledges that out of home placements don't work: In a 2019 evaluation, Hennepin County found that "while youth successfully discharged (from out of home placement) recidivated at slightly lower rates than those who were unsuccessfully discharged, this difference was not significant. Youth successfully completing an RTC (residential treatment center) placement were just as likely to recidivate than those who were unsuccessfully discharged" (Hoffman & Carlson, 2019).

Now is the time for Hennepin County to make a transformative shift in the way it approaches youth justice.

Our Vision for the Future of Youth Justice in Hennepin County

We believe in a future where communities are empowered with the resources and support to provide culturally-affirming care and meaningful accountability, rooted in an understanding of human development, for our youth. We believe in a Hennepin County where the youth justice system is community-controlled and responsive to the specific needs of youth, families, people harmed, and communities. One that acknowledges that society shares responsibility for harms committed by young people whose families and communities have been impacted by legacies of oppression, harm, and exclusion.

Our Proposal for a Path Forward

To achieve this vision, Hennepin County must make investments to support our youth while keeping them in our communities. We see this happening through Hennepin County redistributing resources so that a community-controlled care ecosystem can thrive, consisting of:

- Short- and longer-term housing options
- Counseling and trauma services
- Restorative practices and community healing
- Education attainment and meaningful employment opportunities
- Safe and structured spaces for out-of-school time programming
- Deepened networks of support for youth

We also believe that it is imperative that Hennepin County return the land on which the home school sits to the Native community.

Short- and Longer-Term Housing Options

There are times and situations when it is not safe for a young person to be at home. For short periods of time, while relationships are restored and more stable housing is secured, respite housing must be an available option for youth. These spaces, operated by community members, should feel like a welcoming and hospitable place where youth know they are not alone while they may be in crisis. Similar to the Minneapolis Crisis Nursery, the priority should be providing a safe bed, healthy meals, space for study, engaging activities, and stability planning with a youth's support network. We must also invest in longer-term housing solutions for youth, be they group homes, temporary foster care placements, or supportive independent living opportunities. While youth are working toward repairing harm and growing into the community members we'd like them to be, if home cannot be the place where they reside, there must be safe options, nestled in communities, with supportive adults trained in a positive youth development framework. One night of safe shelter can make a significant difference in a young person's entire future.

Counseling and Trauma Services

We know that many of the youth interacting with the legal system have experienced individual and generational trauma, and would benefit from supportive mental health interventions. The county must invest in expanding the availability (number) and types (individual sessions, group therapy, day treatment) of community-based mental health resources available to youth. Programming should help youth get to the root of their challenges and should be culturally appropriate. Youth deserve to receive help without judgement, help that is holistic to them as individuals, help that includes their broader support systems, and help at their own pace.

Restorative Practices and Community Healing

Investing in restorative practices and community healing is the most efficient way to interrupt violence and create safety. Restorative practices allow youth to understand the impact of their actions and repair harm with the help of their support networks. It also aligns with our vision of responding with consideration for the entire circumstance, not just isolating a single person's action. All levels of harm should be routed through restorative practices. Restorative practices activate youth to be change agents and help all parties (people who have created harm, who have experienced harm, and the broader community) create stronger relationships and boundaries. In addition to addressing conflict as it emerges, restorative practices are helpful data collection tools so that community can understand emerging challenges and concerns. Regular case studies of restorative interventions should be used to inform future investment into community wellbeing.

Education Attainment and Meaningful Workforce Opportunities

Connections to schools and gainful employment are strong and powerful protective factors for youth, providing opportunities for identity development, self-actualization, adult mentorship, positive peer communities, and economic stability. A primary focus of all interventions with youth should be connecting them to high quality and culturally appropriate academic programming and workforce opportunities. Hennepin County needs to invest in educational programming specifically targeted to youth who are at the highest risk of out of home placement. This could look like apprenticeship and skill development programs, scholarships to trade schools, paid internships related to youth's interests, and investments in youth-led social innovations and entrepreneurship.

Safe and structured spaces for out-of-school time programming

Hennepin County must invest in a well-resourced network of community-run cultural and arts education programs outside of school to compensate for where public education fails BIPOC youth. Youth in our communities deserve access to experiential learning and recreational activities that help them to gain a sense of belonging in the world. These programs must be available afterschool, on the weekends, and during school breaks and should be operated by supportive adults trained in trauma response and who embrace youth power. This is an area in which community ownership and decision-making is critical.

Deepened networks of support

A major issue with our youth justice system is its laser focus on youth and their individual behaviors, rather than viewing each person within their family systems and environmental context. Hennepin County must invest in true holistic support for youth by deepening their networks of care. When youth become involved in the legal system, community must be able to step in to provide stability for the entire family system, and to bring to the table additional resources. This could include economic support, housing options, and trauma interventions. We also need to widen communities of care so that they include mentors, coaches, extended family and friends. If the county wants to see outcomes improve for youth, we must really invest in their villages.

Return the land to the Native Community

The County Home School sits on 167 acres of Dakota homeland. With the closure of the facility, this land should be returned to the Native community, along with any profits made related to the property.

The path forward must be led by the community.

Within the geographic borders of Hennepin County exist all of the expertise, wisdom, skills, and passion necessary to build a youth justice response that is rooted in local, effective solutions. We need the youth justice system to create space for the community to lead in this effort. This will require that Hennepin County policymakers and government actors take a different approach to community. We see this happening through:

More transparency from system stakeholders on intervention efficacy

Hennepin County should provide the community with an annual report that details the use and efficacy of its interventions for youth, those run by the county and those contracted to community partners. The county should commit to no longer requiring that youth participate in programs that do not meet community-created standards of success for youth. It is critical that every intervention aimed at impacting youth be effective in producing positive outcomes, measured not only by recidivism rates but more importantly by youth-wellbeing outcomes, quality of life indicators, and user satisfaction. Annual evaluations, conducted in partnership with community members, should be made publicly available and should include both program specific data and system-wide measures of success such as overall percentage of youth with prior system contact, program effectiveness scores, 1-year and 2-year recidivism rates, among others.

Increased frequency of Youth Justice Council Meetings.

Hennepin County Youth Justice Council Meetings have been important spaces for community members to learn about the operations of the youth justice system, to share concerns, and to advocate for change. These meetings should be held monthly to create more regular opportunities for community partnership and County accountability to shared goals.

The development and implementation of a county-wide strategy to move towards community-controlled responses and interventions.

To reverse the trend of historic over-investment in state-run punishment systems and under-investment in community-rooted solutions, Hennepin County must commit to a comprehensive strategy that allows for community to intervene to support our youth. This will require a gradual, yet intentional, shift of power and resources from county systems into community-based groups and organizations. We want to collaborate in creating an ambitious plan to work towards zero youth violence and zero youth incarceration by 2023, led by community with the support of systems, rather than the other way around.

There is an incredible opportunity in this moment to transform the approach to youth in our communities, leadership must rise to the challenge.

Community members and the MN Coalition for Youth Justice are eager to hear your response. We are excited to discuss the specifics of each demand and would like to meet with you, either in a public forum like the next Youth Justice Council Meeting, or in individual conversations, to begin actualizing our vision.

Sources

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