Draft Synthesis of Recommendations for a Reimagined Youth Justice Model in Los Angeles County

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Section A: Overview and High-Level Synthesis of Subcommittee Proposals

Long-Term Vision: By 2030, by intentionally focusing on equitable investments in Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) and their communities, all young people in Los Angeles County have access to youth development resources and opportunities that promote their well-being and safety and that of their families and communities. In every community, systems are accountable to the people they impact, address the root causes of conflict and harm, and meaningfully empower young people to build accountability and responsibility to repair harm.

Core Values Guiding the Reimagined Youth Justice Model:

- **Racial and Ethnic Equity**: Understanding the historical construct of structural racism is fundamental to critically examine the justice systems long fueled structural investments in custody, control and punishment to achieve public safety. This system of racial hierarchy must be clearly understood in the current construct, acknowledged and directly engaged if we are to achieve equity and well-being for communities of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) impacted by the justice apparatus.

  Thus, a foundational premise is to name what is hidden in plain sight, the impacts of the tools of racial hierarchy in the administration of justice. At the root of these tools is the historical paradigm of white supremacy and patriarchy associated with public safety. Failure to talk about how white supremacy and patriarchy operates in the administration of justice and in our communities means we silence BIPOC and propagate the invisibility of privilege. Not only does racial and ethnic equity demand the dismantling of structural pillars of inequities but also the ideology of white supremacy that allows for the persistence of the punishment industry.

- **Centering Community**: Integral to achieving equity and well-being is centering the communities most impacted by the justice system. Centering community reflects a commitment to authentic inclusion, power sharing, and valuing of impacted communities' lived-in experience and expertise to advance and drive solutions for achieving equity and eliminating racial and ethnic disparities. This entails designing change with, not for, BIPOC communities impacted by the justice apparatus.

- **Youth Development**: Young people experience decision-making, risk-taking, and trauma differently than adults and require intentional investment in their strengths and relationships to others in order to thrive. Youth Development is a framework that brings a positive, strengths-based and social justice orientation to working with youth, families, and communities; characterized by opportunities that promote a sense of belonging, usefulness, and power by helping young people develop competencies that will enable them to grow and lead healthy,
responsible, and caring lives. Taking a youth development approach to youth justice therefore includes:

a. **Reduce contact between youth and the justice system** including current tools of labeling, detention, and separation.

b. **Adopt a social justice approach to supporting and growing a network of community-based youth services and supports** that build on youth’s strengths and assets and support the development of youth’s skills and competencies through learning collaboratives and capacity-building, with a focus on areas of the county that most need resources / support. All components of a new model would cultivate the core competencies of youth development from prevention/pre-police contact through disposition and re-entry:

   - **Health Competence**: Good current health status as well as knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that will ensure future health, including access to physical and mental health services, substance use services, emotional healing, nutrition, sports and recreation services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.

   - **Social Competence**: Skills for understanding and appreciation of self, culture, language and history, as well as appreciation for others, including self-discipline and decision-making; being able to work and communicate with others; develop financial literacy; technological access and skills; parental skills; empathy for others and the ability to solve problems without domination, retribution or violence - restorative and transformative justice.

   - **Environmental Competence**: Skills for understanding and appreciation of environmental health, justice, and sustainability; also includes built environment, environmental racism, and access to housing and resources, that are oriented towards one’s well-being and the policies, laws, and regulations that impact one’s healthy development.

   - **Cognitive / Creative Competence**: Knowledge and ability to appreciate and participate in areas of healing-centered creative expression for all of the ways people experience their worlds, including access to quality education, critical thinking, critical pedagogy, analysis and problem solving; literacy, academic support, and college preparation; self-expression through the arts; critical examination of systemic oppression and root causes of inequity and awareness of power, privilege, prejudice, and social justice.

   - **Vocational Competence**: Understanding and skills of life planning and a diverse range of career choices, work options, work-life balance, life planning, and steps to act on those choices, including exploration of interests and gifts; job preparation, education, and training; seeking mentorship and support navigating career pathways; employment and career exploration; goal-setting and financial literacy.

   - **Leadership Competence**: Understanding and skills of personal values, moral and ethical decision-making, and participation in efforts that contribute to the greater good, including the right to speak out, organize and to both serve and change their schools, communities, and society including leadership pipelines, advisory groups, and board memberships.

c. **Ensure that every interaction a young person has with the legal system is rooted in the principles of youth development**, from contact with law enforcement to the experience inside a courtroom.

d. When the use of out of home placements—non-secure or secure—is necessary, **utilize family-based and home-like settings** whenever possible, maintain safe environments in placements, engage/deliver services within a culturally responsive and therapeutic milieu, and provide reentry services to ensure a seamless and positive return to the community.
• **Transparency and Accountability:** Prioritize transparency, trustworthiness, and accountability of all youth development partners, including through involvement of youth and community in program, policy, and budgetary decision-making with a focus on meaningful data and research infrastructure with support for participatory evaluation. A transparent and accountable approach uses quantitative and qualitative data to address the root causes of system involvement, acknowledging that the size and scope of the justice system must be reduced in order to improve equity and respond to the impact of structural racism on the lives of black and brown communities. This includes using data to shift investment from the current system as it downsizes to historically underfunded community-based systems and communities.

• **Public Safety Achieved Through Well-being:** The Resolution requires the Youth Justice Work Group to design a youth probation system that was not “overly punitive” and was “centered on healing and growth essential for improving the well-being of young people.” Thus, we are designing an approach to youthful law violations and misbehaviors which focus on the metrics of well-being for all concerned. As the resolution suggests, too often we equate punishment with safety. Our approach is one that balances positive youth development and appropriate sanctions for harm. This value rejects the “do the crime, do the crime” ethos and embraces a structure that manifests in building accountability through support and connection rather than punishment and isolation. The values embedded in this approach prioritize healing and developmentally appropriate principles. This includes diverting as many young people as possible away from formal justice system involvement and into community-based restorative and transformative justice programs significantly downsizing the reimagined youth justice system.

• **Evidence-Informed Design** - Policies and practices should be guided by evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, about what tools and strategies can meaningfully improve outcomes compared to those of our current system.

• **Restorative and Transformative Justice** - Youth justice should prioritize strengthening relationships between individuals and social connections within communities as well as addressing the structural barriers and inequities that contribute to system involvement in order to support people’s ability to be accountable to one another, repair harm, and exercise what is right, fair, and equitable. Restorative and transformative approaches to justice are effective strategies for meaningful accountability and repairing harm because they provide healing and support, both for those who have been harmed and those that have caused harm, understanding that oftentimes people may exist simultaneously in both realities.

• **Coordination, Collaboration and Power Sharing** - Improve coordination and collaboration across systems and between systems, youth, and community. Drive decision-making about systems coordination and integration, programming and direct services, evaluation and funding through identifying, developing and resourcing opportunities for collaborative, multidisciplinary partnerships among county agencies, community-based organizations, youth and parents that have been impacted by the juvenile justice system, survivors of violence and harm, and other interested stakeholders.

**Overview of the Transformed Model:**

The work of the Youth Justice Work Group sought to develop an aspirational model that seeks to acknowledge, undo and replace the structural racism rooted in the administration of justice. A model that supports the goal of our charge, providing for opportunities and the health and well-being of young people. Thus, the model includes critical design concepts implicating all of the principle system partners along the legal continuum. We include the starting point of first contact with law enforcement, moving to the decisions and role of the prosecutor and courts in the legal process. Change shifts from custody, control and
punishment to systems centered on restorative responses and collaborative team decision making with impacted community.

The breadth of the model is troubling and disconcerting to some while necessary, exciting and forward looking to others. We have balanced our charge and pragmatism with the aspirational, with the seeds to be nurtured for restorative and transformative change. While broader in focus, the model nevertheless meets our mandate to shift to a care first model for the youth and families of Los Angeles County.

These seeds of change will require further nurturing to develop that transformed system that is sought. We appreciate and anticipate many of these components will be part of the phasing process.

Feasibility of ending youth probation: The Youth Justice Work Group sought to explore the feasibility of transitioning responsibility of justice-involved youth away from the Probation Department to a new agency and determined that such a transition was indeed feasible if conducted over time with a clear, evidence-informed plan and ongoing collaborative planning and oversight.

The feasibility and importance of transitioning the responsibility of justice-involved youth to a new agency is informed by the following:

- Despite well-intentioned incremental reforms which lead to significant population reductions, failure to meaningfully transform the culture and orientation of the agency and shift it away from outdated punitive approaches that have been shown to be ineffective and harmful, especially in juvenile facilities, and facilitate quality community-based services and genuine community engagement;
- The high and increasing costs of probation, especially incarceration, despite the decrease in numbers of youth arrested, detained and prosecuted;
- Relative promise of recent County efforts to implement values and strategies of collaborative, decentralized community-based alternatives to the traditional justice system.
- Consistent findings from qualitative research conducted with justice-involved youth, community-based service providers, and Probation staff that the current system’s structure does not support youth or staff wellbeing.
- The inability of Probation to provide meaningful data or adapt to meet research and evaluation needs.
- In the limited data that does exist, clear patterns of structural inequity and increasing disproportionate burden on youth of color and on Black youth in particular.

To achieve the desired outcomes of well-being and advancing the life opportunities of those most vulnerable to traditional justice involvement, the YJWG designed a model structured beyond the limits of probation and all its reforms and has envisioned an entirely new and innovative community centered approach. A reimagined model for youth justice in Los Angeles County is therefore one in which the size and scope of the existing youth justice system is effectively and equitably reduced based on data, recognizing that most young people can and should be supported in their homes and communities and most functions of the current justice system are better served by investments in youth and community development, wellbeing, and accountability.

Foundational Components of the New Model: With a phased transition that includes ongoing planning for implementation details that require further dialogue and shared learning, this transformed model includes the following foundational components:

Department of Youth Development - This model is supported by a Department of Youth Development that promotes justice and safety by facilitating shared learning and building capacity for youth development, restorative practices, and collaborative decision-making; overseeing and being accountable for the expansion of community-led alternatives to crisis response and justice
system involvement; and developing the strong, evidence-informed infrastructure and workforce needed to transition functions of Juvenile Probation in phases over the next 5 years.

Youth Development Network - With support and coordination from the new Department, investment in a thriving community-based network is the foundation of this new model. This network makes it possible for youth to have access to 24-hour youth and community centers with high quality activities and services in their communities that support their health, social, cognitive and creative, vocational, environmental, and leadership competencies. These competencies help youth thrive and protect against justice system involvement. If an incident occurs at school, youth are connected to community-building or transformative justice circles instead of being suspended or expelled and/or are referred to a local diversion program instead of being arrested for a school-related incident as schools are supported in building their capacity for youth development and restorative practices.

Youth Empowerment Support (YES) Teams - Justice entails a series of decisions that are typically made harshly for youth and communities of color. These decisions are generally made absent proximity to the young people or families’ lived experience. A critical component of the Youth Development Network are the YES teams. The YES teams are a shift to and the vehicle for effective multidisciplinary team decision making along the continuum of the youth legal system. The diverse network of partners that will establish authentic and deep relationships with youth, families and communities, will be resourced to bring a community lens to decision making. The relationships and connections uniquely position the YES team members to influence decisions to ensure racial, cultural and restorative responses; responses that reflect the principles of youth development.

Home-like, Community-Based Therapeutic Housing and Reentry - The model moves away from the notion of institutionalized detention and incarceration in dehumanizing facilities to providing therapeutic supportive housing and reentry services, including a new community-based, small home-like model that provides restorative, healing environments with a range of security levels and holistic services, opportunities for youth to step down to lower security settings, and improved reentry supports for young people who are not able to return home or be served in their communities.

Supportive Youth Development Services and Credible Messengers - Rather than supervision that focuses on compliance, the model would advance peacebuilding, reduce violence, and engage youth and families in supportive case management services through supporting and growing a youth development workforce, including opportunities for County staff to participate in professional development and transitional training and connecting with efforts to hire credible messengers and peer navigators.

Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms -- Any model must have a robust transparency and accountability mechanism that connects, streamlines and builds on the existing work of oversight and advisory bodies and meaningfully involves youth and community in program, policy, and budgetary decision-making.