

Campaigns to End Youth Incarceration and Invest in Alternatives



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Introduction

In 2017, The Public Welfare Foundation sought to document and evaluate two state campaigns to end youth incarceration in New Jersey and Virginia. Innovation Network¹ was selected to document and evaluate the campaigns, as well as to support reflection and learning among them.

The evaluation is guided by four central evaluation questions. These questions are designed to solicit facts, explanations, interpretations, insights, and feedback.

1. **What are the state campaigns doing?** What are their goals? What are their strategies? How are they carrying out their work? What seems to be working well or not as well?
2. **What milestones or successes have the campaigns achieved in the past year?** What brought about the change? Why was the change important? How has the campaign's capacity or effectiveness changed in the past year? Why?
3. **What factors have contributed to milestones or successes?** What is going on in the context of the campaigns that helps or hinders them?
4. **How has the Youth First initiative contributed to the state campaigns?** How have the Youth First staff and/or partners assisted the campaigns? What services/supports provided by Youth First provide the most benefit to campaigns?

This report highlights findings from the second year of data collection, January 2019 – December 2019.

Methodology

In order to document and share learnings across the individual state campaigns working to close youth prisons, Innovation Network facilitated multiple methods of data collection:

1. **Evaluation planning meetings:** Innovation Network collected important background and contextual information about each state from Youth First and a designated point person from each state campaign. Throughout the course of the evaluation, Innovation Network was in touch with members of Youth First and the campaign point people to stay abreast of key transitions and activities in the campaigns.
2. **Document review:** Innovation Network reviewed several background and strategy documents provided by Youth First and state campaigns.
3. **Reflection meetings with each state campaign:** Half-day reflection meetings were held with Virginia and New Jersey during the summer of 2019. The meeting activities were framed around the findings from the previous year's evaluation, focusing primarily on the campaign's efforts cultivating youth-adult partnership and engaging community. As in the previous year, the evaluation team engaged in a timelining session to provide an opportunity for the campaigns to reflect on their yearly activities (focusing on successes and challenges).
4. **State-level interviews:** Up to six interviews were conducted in each state with campaign members, non-campaign members who are close to the campaigns, and a few individuals removed from the campaign, including at least two policy-level perspectives in each state. Interview questions were

¹ Innovation Network is a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm founded in 1992. We are deeply enmeshed in the social sector; exclusively working with philanthropic and nonprofit organizations, and we are a 501(c)3 organization with over twenty-five years of evaluation, data, and evaluation capacity building expertise. We specialize in helping funders and nonprofits develop their ability to define success, measure results, and improve their effectiveness in programs and advocacy efforts.

primarily open-ended but also included a few close-ended scale questions to benchmark campaign members' feedback in key areas.

Data collection was guided by the central evaluation questions outlined above.

Findings

Our conversations with advocates across states focused on digging more deeply into the strategies and progress of the campaign, especially **youth-adult partnership** and **community engagement**.

Youth-Adult Partnership

Each campaign has a strong focus on building youth-adult partnerships and developing young leaders to lead this work. The campaigns in New Jersey and Virginia are in different stages of developing youth leaders, but both have had successes while also facing many of the same challenges. Campaign members reflected on the strategies that they use to engage youth, and what youth-adult partnerships should look like at three different stages of engagement.

Common strategies for building youth-adult partnerships

The New Jersey campaign's Youth Councils and the Virginia campaign's Youth for RISE were both designed to engage youth and develop them into leadership roles. Across the two campaigns, common themes emerged around what healthy youth-adult partnerships look like at different stages of youth engagement. When campaigns are **first engaging with new youth**, campaign members described an ideal engagement as adults being open, inviting, and building an environment of trust with youth. As **youth become more engaged** in the campaign, adults should continue to create a safe space where young people know that they can be honest, implement a concrete youth development approach, and strengthen young people's interest while increasing their responsibilities. As **youth grow into leadership roles**, both campaigns reflected that adults should sit back and be quiet, while youth lead. Adults provide training and support, such as advocacy and budget trainings, but youth are the advocates. Both campaigns acknowledged the importance of having campaign staff and leaders who have lived experience similar to impacted youth, as it is critical to building trust and hope for young people.

Successes in youth-adult partnerships

Both campaigns have developed infrastructure to engage youth, build advocacy capacity, and develop their leadership skills. Both are also working to provide holistic support to youth, though both face challenges. Campaigns expose youth to community partners and decisionmakers, and bring in speakers to provide more opportunities for them to engage. They spoke about youth leaders who are prepared to be spokespeople, able to provide testimony, and able to lead other youth.

Barriers to successful youth-adult partnerships

Making sure that youth are fully integrated into larger campaign activities is a challenge, but an essential component of developing youth leaders and youth-led campaigns. Youth should know why the campaign does what it does, why decisions are being made, and should be a part of those decisions when appropriate. Both campaigns also spoke about the need to include voices of more diverse youth, including young girls and women who have experienced incarceration and LGBTQ+ youth. Lastly, having the time and resources to support youth sufficiently is an ongoing challenge, as impacted youth have experienced trauma and many experience difficulties having their basic needs met.

Lessons learned

1. Supporting impacted youth fully is all-consuming and requires a big commitment of time—deep relationships are vital to engaging youth, especially supporting them through personal crises such as homelessness or violence. Campaigns need staff dedicated to this youth support role.
2. Having staff and leaders with similar lived experiences who can act as examples for impacted youth creates hope, helps young people imagine possibilities, and helps to retain them as leaders.

Community Engagement

Each campaign recognizes that engaging with individuals and other groups in the community is essential to the success of their efforts towards juvenile justice. These communities have important perspectives that drive the direction of campaigns and are valuable as changemakers who can influence or create change for youth in the criminal justice system. In both Virginia and New Jersey, these communities include:

1. Impacted youth and youth in general,
2. Community members such as impacted families,
3. Faith communities,
4. Advocates working on criminal justice and other intersecting issues, and
5. Government officials such as state officials and legislators.

Campaigns selected three or four specific communities to evaluate more deeply – to reflect on the strategies they use to engage each community and pull out key successes and challenges. Both Virginia and New Jersey chose to focus on communities with whom they are seeking to grow engagement, including youth, legislators and state officials, faith groups, unlikely allies, and other advocates.

Common strategies for engaging communities

Each state campaign uses targeted strategies to engage with community groups important to the campaign, with both campaigns **centering relationships**. Virginia is particularly skilled at leveraging existing relationships with some communities, and both Virginia and New Jersey effectively build trust through tactics such as relational meetings with community groups they do not have strong relationships with yet. Both campaigns have engaged in **peaceful rallies and marches** that raise visibility and facilitate a dialogue about the issues the campaign cares about. The campaigns are **working with the system** to raise community voices; in Virginia, the goal is to bring the community into all aspects of the work, such as inviting community members to city council meetings. New Jersey is working to connect youth and legislators in person, helping legislators realize the need for investment in young people. Finally, both campaigns have chosen to **target unlikely allies**, particularly victims of crime, who help build credibility and empathy for the campaign's juvenile justice goals.

Successes in community engagement

Both campaigns highlighted their effectiveness with **developing relationships within their respective communities**. In Virginia, engagement is described as consistent and community driven. They have worked to become more accessible to community members through relational meetings and community events, creating space for community voices to be heard. The New Jersey campaign created messages that resonate with the community and held community meetings across the state, working to make this a more sustained effort. Both campaigns have also **developed relationships with legislators and made space for community voices**. The Virginia campaign has become a credible messenger for the community while the

New Jersey campaign has connected youth and legislators. Additionally, the Virginia campaign discussed their role in successfully **sparking and facilitating productive and challenging conversations** on topics such as racial justice.

Barriers to successful community engagement

Political forces have been detrimental to campaigns' ability to engage communities. In Virginia, politicians are averse to change and are resistant to the campaign's policy goals. New Jersey has experienced similar resistance, especially in the slow formation of and exclusion of voices on a task force that could have been an effective vehicle to transform juvenile justice. Additionally, campaigns discussed barriers such as **fighting apathy** in the community, a **need to diversify** the types of people engaged in the campaign, and the **lack of resources** required to focus on community engagement efforts such as having dedicated staff for engaging with vital populations such as youth.

Lessons learned

3. Offering other advocates concrete opportunities to partner with little effort can strengthen relationships and lead to improved collaboration (e.g., asking other advocates for questions they would like to include in an external questionnaire so that they can share data back).
4. Shared language and consistency across groups and time can help create a consistent message that raises campaign visibility and standing.

Experience with Youth First

State campaigns continue to receive a variety of supports from Youth First, including intensive technical assistance and thought partnership. Youth First provides a national perspective on juvenile justice issues to state campaigns and connects campaigns with each other and with experts in the field through convenings and calls. Youth First also provides individualized support directly to campaigns, situating the campaigns to effectively lead state-wide.

“Youth First is just awesome. When we need them, they come. They are available to bounce strategy ideas off. They bring like-minded people and sister campaigns together. They create reports and strategy tools, [hold] convenings, [and provide] recommendation of strategies.” [Campaign Lead]

Successful supports provided by Youth First

As in previous years, state campaigns spoke very positively about Youth First. Campaigns lean on Youth First for a variety of supports, including strategic thinking expertise, convening, third party perspectives, communications/media support, and general thought partnership. Specifically, respondents acknowledged their support with visioning, power mapping, reviewing legislation, engaging with youth, bringing states together, and inviting good speakers. Campaigns appreciated Youth First's openness and readiness to share their knowledge of cutting-edge reform practices in other states and across the country, both through examples and data.

Respondents commended the Youth First staff (Liz, Mishi, Carmen, and Hernan) for their knowledge, accessibility, presence at campaign events, and overall care and support for campaign members and the impacted community. Youth First have steered clear from a one-size-fits-all model – they respond to the context, meet campaigns where they are, and incorporate feedback into their practice.

Youth First continues to build relationships between state campaigns through its convenings, offering an opportunity for campaigns to see other models of the work, learn from one another, and offer ideas and support to one another. Respondents indicated that the convenings have gotten better each year – they have the opportunity to partner with other campaigns facing similar issues and exchange experiences, and to discuss topics that have been challenging such as budgeting. As one respondent indicated, *“We were able to talk to another state about what we encountered and what we did to deal with it. We got interesting recommendations from other states.”* However, a few respondents, including youth, acknowledged that the conversation may have gone “over the heads of young people” and recommended providing opportunities for building youth capacity around specific language and topic areas so that they can also meaningfully engage in the conversation and get the most out of the convenings. As one respondent said, *“Baltimore was good, [but we] wanted more interaction between all the states. We need to push [the youth] and make it interesting... turn strategy sessions into a game or something... do something different with youth. The language that you all are using isn’t good [for youth].”* Another respondent found the conflict resolution practice to be informative. They appreciated the discussion with Baltimore Restore, a group that has done a lot of work around restorative justice.

Suggestions for additional support from Youth First

As in previous years, state campaigns experienced minimal challenges with Youth First, and therefore, no themes emerged from the data. However, campaigns and national-level partners provided some specific ideas for how Youth First could continue to support them (each mentioned by only one respondent):

- Tailor menu to attendees,
- Offer more ongoing trainings throughout the year especially for youth (e.g., training on how to talk to the media),
- Create a toolkit or strategy for talking about when youth may have to be out of home temporarily due to being systems-involved (i.e., not incarcerated but may be unsafe for the youth to remain at home/in the community for the time being),
- Host additional convenings each year (ideally three!),
- Help create a national story to tie states together and show national movement in closing youth prison and investing in young people’s communities, and
- Hold a workshop or discussion to develop a standardized definition of what a youth prison is.

Lessons learned

5. State campaigns continue to lean on Youth First for a variety of supports, including strategic thinking expertise, convenings, third party perspectives, communications/media support, and general thought partnership.
6. State campaigns are looking to Youth First to elevate their work nationally, to help create a national story to tie states together and show national movement in closing youth prison and investing in young people’s communities.
7. State campaigns would like more training and support for youth (e.g., training on how to talk to the media, toolkit for talking/strategizing with youth involved in the system).

Lessons Learned

YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP

1. Supporting impacted youth fully is all-consuming and requires a big commitment of time—deep relationships are vital to engaging youth, especially supporting them through personal crises such as homelessness or violence. Campaigns need staff dedicated to this youth support role.
2. Having staff and leaders who have similar lived experiences and can act as examples for youth who have been incarcerated create hope for youth and help them to imagine possibilities and to retain other leaders.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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YOUTH FIRST

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CASE STUDIES



New Jersey



Virginia



NEW JERSEY

New Jersey has the highest youth incarceration disparities than any other state in the nation, with black youth being 21 times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts. Through its efforts, the #150yearsisenough Campaign aims to transform the juvenile justice system into a community-based system of care.

+ CONTEXT



The #150yearsisenough Campaign is led by the Closure Working Group of a coalition of juvenile justice advocates



A democratic governor, Governor Murphy, was elected in 2017.



The governor has been slow to enact measures, including closure, won by the campaign before Governor Christie's departure.

Source: Gov. Christie's quote obtained from insidenj.com

+ KEY STRATEGIES

The campaign centers youth in all of their work.



Community Engagement

The campaign uses targeted strategies, relationship-building, and visibility to engage a variety of community groups in the campaign, including the State and unlikely allies.



Youth-Adult Partnership

Several Youth Councils launched across the state create centers of youth activism, where youth lead youth on issues that concern them. Youth are also engaged with the #150YearsisEnough campaign and provide important perspective and voice to campaign efforts.

+ PROGRESS

After early success, the campaign has hit some road blocks.



The #150yearsisenough campaign launched on June 2017, on the 150th anniversary of the opening of the New Jersey Training School for Boys.



In January 2018, Governor Christie announced his plan for closure, and in October 2018 newly elected Governor Murphy established a task force to oversee plans for two youth rehabilitation centers in their place.



After 500 community members attended The 94 Percent Movement Rally, the task force finally convened, although has not been the vehicle for juvenile justice as the campaign had hoped.



The campaign has increased engagement with youth and launched three Youth Councils in Newark, Trenton, and Camden.

“Young people impacted by the system are front and center.”

+ NEXT STEPS

Efforts to bring about the community's vision for juvenile justice in New Jersey will continue.



Support the NJ Youth Justice Transformation Act

The Closure Working Group contributed to and is building support for a bill that would ensure prison closure and overhaul the juvenile justice system in New Jersey.



Influence the Task Force for the Continued Transformation of Youth Justice in New Jersey

The task force is responsible for prison closure and building smaller secure facilities in their place. The group is inserting community voice into those discussions.



Continue to Engage Community, Particularly Youth

The group will continue to meaningfully engage the community in community-based alternatives to incarceration, and are working to integrate Youth Councils into the larger efforts of the campaign.

New Jersey Case: #150yearsisenough Campaign

Background

While the juvenile justice space in New Jersey (NJ) has seen some improvements, such as the passing of the S2003 law in 2015 that aims to provide more age appropriate treatment of minors in the juvenile justice system and grants them access to rehabilitation services, the NJ juvenile justice system still relies heavily on youth prison as punishment for youth offenses, especially for youth of color. In fact, NJ currently has the largest racial disparity in the country, with black youth overly represented when compared to their white counterparts, even when both commit similar offenses.²

“...in New Jersey, Black kids are [21 times] more likely to be committed to a secure juvenile facility than their white counterparts.” [Bring Our Children Home: Ain’t I A Child? ³]

Youth Justice New Jersey (YJNJ) is a coalition of more than 30 organizations committed to juvenile justice reform that was formed in 2014 and is the New Jersey member of the National Juvenile Justice Network. Some coalition organizations include Salvation and Social Justice, ACLU NJ, NAACP NJ and Equal Justice USA. Their mission is to “reduce the number of incarcerated youth; promote rehabilitative community-based alternatives to incarceration; ensure incarcerated youth are free from abusive practices and that they receive quality services and education; end school policies and practices that push youth out of classrooms and into the criminal justice system; and eliminate disparate treatment of youth of color in the juvenile justice system.”⁴

YJNJ’s Closure Workgroup

Youth Justice New Jersey’s Closure Workgroup is one of the various workgroups of the YJNJ coalition. While the YJNJ coalition initially functioned as one entity with multiple priorities—including closure of youth prisons; alternatives to incarceration and reinvestment; disrupting the school to prison pipeline; and improving the conditions of confinement, sentencing, and parole—having such varied priorities posed a challenge for the coalition in deciding which priorities to focus on advancing further. In attempt to expedite progress on key priority areas, the YJNJ coalition made a strategic decision to create distinct workgroups based on coalition team members’ key areas of work, passions, and desired approaches for advancing youth justice reform. This case study focuses on the efforts of the Closure Workgroup.

#150yearsisenough Campaign

The Closure Workgroup has been diligently working to abolish youth prisons in the state through their #150yearsisenough Campaign. They set out to obtain a decision in favor of closing two youth prisons: the New Jersey Training School for Boys (“Jamesburg”) and the Female Secure Care and Intake Facility (“Hayes”) within a two-year period, an ambitious, but reasonable, goal. Through the group’s dedicated

² Source: Bring our children home: Ain’t I a child?; http://www.njjn.org/uploads/digital-library/Ain't_I_A_Child_Final_.pdf

³ Source: Joshua Rovner, The Sentencing Project, Racial Disparities in Youth Commitments and Arrests; <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Racial-Disparities-in-Youth-Commitments-and-Arrests.pdf>

⁴ Source: <http://www.youthjusticenj.org/>

efforts and strategic planning, on January 8, 2018, six months after the launch of the 150 Years is Enough Campaign, Governor Chris Christie announced his decision to close both youth prisons. Furthermore, Governor Christie announced the decision to build two youth rehabilitation centers in place of the youth prisons.

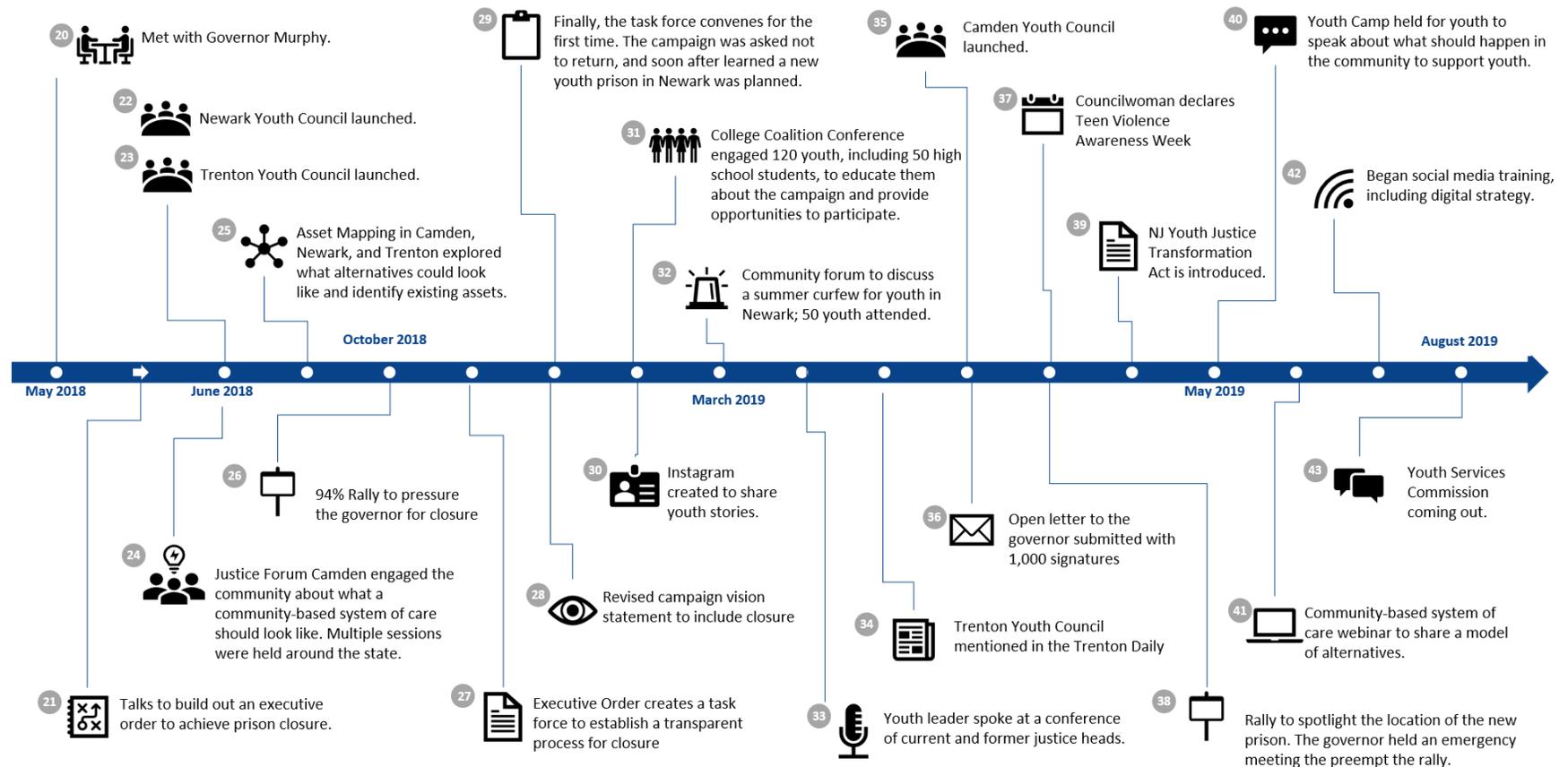
With the announcement of closure, the workgroup has transitioned its attention to the administration of New Jersey's current Governor Murphy to realize the closure of youth prisons and transform youth justice in New Jersey. After applying pressure to the new governor, through efforts such as the 94% Rally, which highlighted the high percentage of African Americans who voted for Murphy, the Governor established a task force to oversee a transparent process for implementing closure. The Task Force for the Continued Transformation of Youth Justice in New Jersey was convened with a variety of partners, including opposition members to closure. Yet, despite nominations, there are no youth and no family members of systems involved youth in the taskforce.

Moving forward

The campaign continues to work to influence the taskforce in support of alternatives, as well as through other measures, such as the creation of the NJ Youth Justice Transformation Act, which has acquired nine sponsors including three senators. The campaign is aware of plans to establish a smaller youth prison in Newark and is working diligently to reduce the number of incarcerated youth, advocate for alternatives, and be a voice for youth justice in New Jersey.

Campaign Timeline

Figure 1. Campaign Timeline (May 2018 – August 2019)
 See the 2018 report for campaign timeline prior to May 2018



Successes

Over the last year, Youth Justice New Jersey's Closure Workgroup has effectively leveraged community and youth voices to push for a closure agenda in the state. Identified successes include (1) creating the Taskforce for Continued Transformation of Youth Justice in New Jersey, (2) developing young leaders, and (3) connecting with the community. These successes can be attributed the continued positive culture and strong cohesion within the workgroup.

Creating the Taskforce for the Continued Transformation of Youth Justice in New Jersey

In October 2018, the campaign achieved a win by getting Governor Chris Christie committed to close youth prisons in NJ through convening a taskforce. With strong support from advocates, youth, faith leaders, and practitioners, the taskforce was established to oversee a transparent process for implementing closure. Despite efforts, Governor Murphy compromised the terms of the taskforce and it subsequently fell short of expectations by not including some requested voices, such as youth or the impacted community. However, there were advocates on the taskforce who were prepared to back up the campaign agenda. The campaign also offered an opportunity for the campaign to engage with closure opponents and subsequently have a better grasp of their concerns. One campaign member indicated: *"Through the taskforce, we have been able to have conversations with different leaders on why youth prisons should be open, which has allowed us to rethink how we can strengthen our arguments and shows us the opposition. The union that works for the police department and sheriffs in the prisons are unionized and don't want to lose their jobs, [so they] support new prisons. We have had conversations with these folks and build a stronger stance in closure."*

Developing young leaders

The campaign has dedicated its efforts to lift youth voices, to hear and respond to their thoughts and concerns, and to offer youth an opportunity for ownership through specific projects. Recognizing the power of youth voice and leadership, the campaign has developed an infrastructure of Youth Councils for building advocacy capacity and leadership skills. These councils offer youth opportunities to take ownership in developing the purpose, process, and overall advancement of the council, as well as equip youth with skills that will allow them to participate more authentically in adult meetings (e.g., learn about budgeting). While these councils have proven valuable, there is still a standing question regarding the council's fit and position within the larger campaign, as they continue to feel separated from the campaign's main legislative activities. As one campaign member stated, *"We have had a lot of improvements. Our young people are well armed to go be spokespeople. We have more work to do to make sure they are well equipped on the front end. So that they know everything that we are doing, why we are having a rally, the budget numbers come out so 'here is how you read a budget,' [so youth can] interact meaningfully with the campaign."*

Connecting with the community

This year, the campaign has demonstrated success in connecting with community leaders, such as community activists and parents. This success stemmed from their effective communication and

messaging strategies. Such strategies included messages, hashtags, and carefully crafted information that resonated with the targeted population. For example, the campaign framed their message by connecting the location of the existing facility in Bordentown with the broader historical context. The campaign has also been actively involving communities in their campaign efforts by engaging in strategic conversations with the community (e.g., asset mapping) and gathering important information from the community (e.g., actively pulling together key questions from the community).

More broadly, the campaign has built its outside game strategy through an intentional effort to engage the entire state. Acknowledging and respecting the many different regions within New Jersey, the campaign has been cultivating and sustaining relationships with community members across the state by holding forums, face-to-face meetings, coffee dates, and more. The campaign recognizes the importance of traveling across the state and building meaningful connections with communities so they feel connected, engaged, and willing to mobilize around the cause.

Challenges

While YJNJ's campaign continues to make significant strides towards changing the juvenile justice system in New Jersey, its members identified key challenges that they faced this year. Major challenges to their work include (1) the undermining of the taskforce, (2) politics and state dynamics, and (3) engaging more authentically with diverse youth.

Taskforce is undermined

In October 2018, Governor Chris Christie committed to close youth prisons in NJ through convening a taskforce. Governor Murphy, however, compromised the terms of the taskforce and it subsequently fell short of expectations. While the NJISJ president was on the taskforce, the taskforce did not include youth or family members of system involved youth, despite nominations and requests. Furthermore, the taskforce was delayed in convening. As one campaign member indicated: *"The taskforce was ...supposed to start in January but we didn't have it until February. No youth on it...No impacted family members on it. The Institute president is on it and the commissioner of the JJC (Jersey Justice Commission) is the head of the taskforce and has been openly non-receptive to our issue."*

Politics and state dynamics

Respondents indicated that politics and state dynamics have posed a challenge to the campaign. In addition to having the highest racial disparity in youth incarceration, a high recidivism rate, and high incarceration costs, New Jersey is a divided and segregated state. Organizations across the state are not working together or aligning on a set message or scope. Furthermore, respondents experienced challenges with not having a national standardized definition of what it means to be a youth prison, opening the possibility for opponents to build youth prisons under the guise of something different, such as a "youth rehabilitation center." This challenge came to light when the campaign heard that New Jersey is planning to build a new youth prison in Newark and calling it a rehabilitation center. Recognizing that youth prisons are half empty, the campaign wants NJISJ to conduct an analysis of prison occupancies to reveal these data before building new prisons.

"Challenge has been politics. Trying to get people to be honest about information they know and share it with communities. Trying to understand the scope of different

organizations in New Jersey. [New Jersey is] very notorious about being divided and very segregated. Different organizations not always working together.” [Campaign member]

Engaging more authentically with diverse youth

While respondents acknowledged the efforts made towards including youth voices and building youth leaders, some respondents also highlighted the need to better include voices of LGBTQ+ youth and young women and girls. This would require bringing in adults who can relate to these youth and provide more tailored support. Some respondents also suggested finding different ways to connect with youth who are currently systems-involved and working with corrections officers and parole officers to reach these young people.

Some respondents acknowledge the challenges with centering systems-involved youth; youth not only take on this campaign but still must deal with challenges of having basic needs met (e.g., housing instability, food insecurity, etc.) as well as challenges that emerged from traumatic experiences (e.g., hard-to-tell stories). Integrating structured self-care into the work can be challenging for a campaign as it is not a direct service organization and may not have the necessary capacity to do so.

Lastly, respondents highlighted some challenges that remain with youth not yet being fully integrated into the campaign. While everyone on the council is open to hearing youth voices, youth are not always at the table and are invited only when necessary. Some youth feel tokenized, with only a few repeatedly asked to attend panels or events. Ideally, more youth would be more actively involved when it comes to action. As one campaign member indicated, *“We need more focus on the needs for the LGBTQ+ population. The specific needs that they may have that are different than the general population. Bring in adults who can help with that [and] more focus on young women and girls and what their needs are in the campaign and communities.”*

Strategies: Youth-Adult Partnerships & Community Engagement

Cultivating Strong Youth-Adult Partnerships

In reflecting about their own work building youth-adult partnerships, the Closure Workgroup team talked about their successes and challenges and how to best support and develop young leaders. They described what strong youth-adult partnerships should look like at each stage of engagement – (1) the first time young people learn about and engage with the campaign; (2) young people have started engaging in campaign activities; and (3) young people are taking leadership roles within the campaign – and then talked through how this actually looks for the 150 Years is Enough campaign, and what they might be able to do to strengthen this work.

The workgroup’s vision of what an ideal youth-adult partnership **should** look like at each stage:



First Contact

Adults are open, non-judgmental, and share knowledge and time freely with young people. Young people feel safe to explore and share; their confidentiality is respected and are encouraged but not mandated to attend meetings.



Started Engaging

Young people feel comfortable engaging with the campaign and participating in the conversation. Adults support and strengthen young people’s interest and increase youth’s responsibilities.



Youth as Leader

Youth lead and adults step back while providing supports such as training. Youth are heavily involved and have a voice in the campaign.

The campaign discussed what youth-adult partnership looks like **in reality** at each stage:

FIRST CONTACT

NJISJ has effectively built partnerships with people and organizations who come into direct contact with youth, including families, organizations, and service providers who support youth. Many of the youth who engage with the 150 Years is Enough Campaign are introduced through the Youth Advocate Program (YAP). Young people who are introduced to the campaign learn how the campaign provides basic necessities to enable them to attend: food, beverages, and transportation costs are provided to youth during meetings.

The campaign acknowledged there are still areas to strengthen in first connecting with young people. They shared that they can improve their ability to connect with youth about their needs to ensure those needs are met. They can also do more to onboard youth to the campaign, providing more information about the campaign to help youth’s decision about whether to attend, providing opportunities to visit the campaign to “check it out” with no commitment, and help youth feel comfortable expressing themselves once they decide to join the campaign, such as translating the language and acronyms used at gatherings.

STARTED ENGAGING

Young people involved in the campaign can join 150 Years is Enough through campaign meetings and events, leadership trainings, or through one of several youth leadership councils. Youth are a visible part of the campaign, and many youth attend campaign events. Youth are at the table where decisions are made in the campaign; adults involved in the campaign verbally tell youth that young people are welcome to participate and express themselves. They work to meet youth’s basic needs as they arise, such as providing clothing donations from partner organizations. The campaign has also graduated more than 50 young people through their Youth Leadership Trainings--eight-week sessions focused on building youth leadership skills.

Youth Councils create opportunities for youth to engage with the campaign. For example, the councils hold youth forums such as one in Newark that focused on curfew penalties and aimed to change city

ordinances. They host field trips and community clean-up days and share the stories and experiences of youth.

“We have Youth Councils where we meet on a bi-weekly basis and provide youth with stipend and food and professional development courses. The purpose is not just to educate youth about the campaign, but it’s for them to take information they accumulated and pick a project in their community that is directly impacting the youth.” [Youth Council leader]

While youth are engaging, and beginning to contribute their voice to the campaign, the campaign discussed how they could continue to be more supportive of youth’s needs and authentically have youth sit at the table. They discussed the need to expose youth to different experiences, for example providing sight-seeing opportunities if youth travel for a field trip. Identifying promising youth and encouraging youth to take on leadership roles was also an area the campaign could strengthen.

YOUTH AS LEADER

Youth Councils are a primary way young people in the 150 Years is Enough Campaign exercise leadership. The councils are comprised of and run by youth. There are currently three councils in the campaign, with each council situated in a county of New Jersey affected by youth incarceration: Camden, Newark, and Mercer County. Youth in different age ranges are engaged in each campaign; members of the campaign shared that the idea of youth has changed as the councils have expanded. Currently, youth range in age from approximately 16 to 24 years. Youth Councils meet bi-weekly and provide youth with stipends and food and professional development courses. Beyond educating youth about the campaign, the councils enable youth to leverage the information and skills gained through their involvement in the campaign and pick a project in their community to address an issue directly impacting youth. These projects provide a forum for youth to exercise and practice formal leadership: for example, in Camden they are collaboratively developing leadership roles for youth to take on, such as a social media point-person and a policy person related to a campaign.

Young people participate in the annual Youth First Leadership Network convenings and are invited to participate in the campaign’s governance board to ensure their voices are represented in the campaign’s strategy. Youth are also leading by speaking up during campaign meetings and events.

“Our young people are well armed to go be spokespeople.” [Campaign member]

During the reflection meeting, members of the campaign discussed the elements of this approach that were working well. A youth member shared that she feels she has the right tools to be an advocate. Marketing the youth councils as “fun,” has been an important and effective marketing approach. Finally, youth are leading actions. At a recent rally, several young people spoke up for themselves.

The campaign identified additional knowledge that would support youth as leaders, such as leadership and media training, and increased transparency about the campaign to enable youth to have a full picture of the campaign. They also discussed their desire for youth to attend more meetings, and young people's desire to talk directly to politicians and be "in the room where it happens." One external observer noted that youth councils are currently located in areas of New Jersey that already receive services and attention related to youth incarceration, and other counties are excluded. The campaign has noted that the Youth Councils reside in cities where many incarcerated youth come from and that they "are not getting the level of services needed."

OVERALL

NJISJ has developed an approach to youth-adult partnership that involves learning on both sides and is designed to complement one another. Members of the campaign are genuinely invested in each young person involved, and their voices are not only included but heard by other members of the campaign. Youth also have ownership over specific projects through youth councils where young people make an impact as they grow their leadership and advocacy skills.

Engaged youth not only take on the 150 Years is Enough campaign but still must deal with challenges of having basic needs met, such as housing and food security. Many have been traumatized and may find it difficult to share their stories. By centering systems-involved youth, the campaign agrees that it needs to incorporate more support for youth's personal needs into advocacy by providing funds and meeting the basic needs of these youth experiencing challenges outside the campaign.

The campaign is interested in broadening the type of youth engaged in the campaign, including exploring different ways to connect with current systems-involved youth and work with correctional officers and parole officers to reach these youth. They would also like to better include voices of LGBTQ+ youth and young women and girls in the campaign.

Concerns have been raised from outside the campaign about the sustainability of aspects of the campaign, including youth councils. One person shared that the campaign is viewed as an outside group coming into communities in need. Often, these communities have experienced other organizations who have expressed their desire to make change, but who have since left. There are concerns that the campaign needs to build more trust within the community, particularly in counties they are most engaged in such as those with youth councils, to ensure the sustainability of the campaign. Counter to this opinion, a member of the campaign shared that they do not consider themselves to be an outside group, and have worked closely with residents in six cities to discuss youth justice transformation.

Community Engagement

STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

The 150 Years is Enough campaign is using a diverse set of strategies to engage communities and further their goals. Across communities, the campaign uses:

- **Targeted strategies.** The campaign is using specific strategies relevant to the group it is working to engage. For example, to reach impacted youth, the campaign engages youth when they are still incarcerated in prison, and when youth are released they have built relationships that make it easier to continue engagement with the campaign.

- **Relationship-building.** The campaign uses tactics that support trust and relationship building with the communities it engages, such as holding one-to-ones and meetings with unlikely allies and legislators and providing basic needs for youth. They also work to connect legislators and youth.
- **Visibility.** Although interested in expanding its use, the campaign uses social media to engage various groups in its mission and engages in public using visible tactics such as rallies. For example, youth launched and manage an Instagram account where they share updates from youth activities on the campaign and encourage others to be involved.

Many of the improvements the campaign would like to make to its engagement strategy are related to expanding outreach and improving holistic care. Members of the campaign named additional groups they hoped to target, such as LGBTQ youth and local governments. They also expressed a desire for improving their understanding of impacted youth’s needs and building a better system in partnership with the state to support them.

ENGAGED COMMUNITIES

The campaign identified communities they currently engage, including youth and impacted youth and families, unlikely allies such as victims of crimes, the faith community, Youth First, other like-minded organizations in New Jersey, unions and trade organizations, the State such as the Department of Public Safety, and legislators and politicians. They selected four to discuss in greater detail and discussed why these groups are important, what strategies the campaign uses to engage these groups, challenges and successes in engaging these groups, and how the campaign could improve its efforts.

Impacted youth

Members of the campaign expressed that they are engaging this group moderately well and have room for improvement.

*“Young people **impacted** by the system are front and center.”* [Campaign lead]

Importance of engaging this group. Impacted youth are directly impacted and should lead the way. They are often the reason organizations exist and are funded. Their voice is important to the campaign and can share their perspective about what can be improved. The campaign allows them a platform to give their opinion.

Strategies for engaging this group. The campaign has begun a new recruitment strategy for impacted youth that involves going to youth prisons to engage youth directly prior to their release. Often, this engagement happens through youth councils, and youth can continue to engage with that council after their release. The campaign works to keep impacted youth active and busy. Youth are invited on trips and are often asked to represent the campaign or be part of organizations.

How the campaign can improve engagement. The campaign expressed interest in bringing more youth to the table and the front lines. They agreed that they could use social media as a platform for youth to share information with the campaign, such as their emotional and physical needs. Impacted youth could be involved more in campaign strategy and leadership, such as inviting more youth to join the campaign governance team and providing training for youth on organizing and campaign strategy to support their involvement. In general, the campaign expressed a need for more communication between youth councils and the campaign governance team. The campaign also shared interest in reaching out to the LGBTQ community, and middle schoolers for early intervention.

Unlikely allies (grassroots, education system, victims of crimes)

Members of the campaign expressed that they are engaging unlikely allies moderately poorly and have room for improvement.

Importance of engaging this group. Unlikely allies bring different perspectives to the work and can appeal to more people. Involving unlikely allies helps the development of a broad coalition that has access to more diverse resources and creates broad appeal that is not just the “usual suspects making noise.”

Strategies for engaging this group. The campaign engages these groups in formal settings, such as meetings at related offices and at conferences. They do outreach through people familiar with these groups, and schedule one-to-one meetings to understand their interests and build a mutually beneficial relationship. The campaign also uses social media and soon expects to launch a digital advocacy tool, which will enable them to quickly contact people interested in the campaign and ask them to take actions easily from their phones, such as sending an email to their legislators.

How the campaign can improve engagement. Communication was listed as a primary area of improvement for engaging with these groups, particularly messaging to these groups and creating ways for them to spread the message, such as organizing groups (particularly victims of crime) to support campaign goals, testify at public hearings, and speak at campaign events. The campaign saw possibilities in working with Safety and Justice on how to engage and organize crime survivors and identifying other grassroots groups such as Black Lives Matter and envisioned Youth Councils leading the outreach to these groups.

The State: Department of Public Safety and Department of Children and Family Services

Members of the campaign expressed that they are engaging this group at a moderate level and have room for improvement.

Importance of engaging this group. The campaign discussed the importance of engaging departments at the state level beyond the Department of Juvenile Justice. Engaging the Department of Public Safety and Department of Children and Family Services would help to bring all systems to the table to address the spectrum of youth’s needs, from mental health, and child welfare, to juvenile justice. Working with these departments could become part of an inside game to help push back on state-led juvenile justice efforts and push the campaign’s goals forward. These departments are also instrumental in establishing support systems for community programming and resources that would support impacted youth and support the campaign’s goals.

Strategies for engaging this group. Currently, the campaign is engaging the state through the task force, meetings, emails, public letters, and OPRA requests. They also hold rallies to engage the state directly.

How the campaign can improve engagement. Overall, the campaign is interested in broadening its engagement with the state. They shared that they wish to increase engagement with the Lieutenant Governor, other agencies such as the Children’s Department, education agencies, labor, economic development, and budget office. They could also engage local and county governments more, such as through mayors and elected officials from key impacted communities, who could be particularly useful in repurposing youth prisons and pushing for community investment funds and supporting community capacity for alternatives to incarceration.

The campaign is also concerned about holistic care for impacted youth, and shared that they could work to develop a process for assessing youth needs across the continuum, improve communication across agencies, and look into the long-term possibility of the Juvenile Justice Commission moving under the Department of Children and Families.

Legislators and Politicians

Members of the campaign expressed that they are engaging this group at a moderate level and have room for improvement.

“We have legislative strategy and talk to legislators to get them to recognize that they need to invest in young people.” [Campaign lead]

Importance of engaging this group. Legislators and politicians can create change as long as the campaign can develop a broad enough base. They are needed to support the passage of laws such as the Youth Justice transformation Act and to build support for alternatives in the community.

Strategies for engaging this group. The campaign engages legislators through the Black Caucus, one-to-one meetings or calls, and through a legislator survey. They work to apply pressure on legislators and politicians and have them meet with youth involved in the campaign.

How the campaign can improve engagement. Members of the campaign thought of specific strategies for improving their engagement of legislators and politicians. They shared opportunities for integrating Action Alerts to the campaign list to activate people to contact their state legislators to support the Youth Justice Transformation Act, strategizing with the bill sponsor to target legislators who can move the bill through relevant communities, and conducting candidate surveys and making the campaign an issue for people running for legislature. They also spoke more broadly about expanding outreach to this group, particularly with legislators from suburban communities, and using new approaches such as social media. The campaign is interested in its members’ role in conducting outreach to this group, and expressed interest in educating members of the campaign on legislative and budget processes and connecting Youth Councils with efforts to engage this group.



VIRGINIA

RISE for Youth is a nonpartisan campaign committed to dismantling the youth prison model by promoting the creation of community-based alternatives. In the summer of 2018, three years after launching within the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC), Rise for Youth became an independent entity focused on building youth leadership and becoming truly community-led.

"To truly be an organization led by people of color and allies... that has been incredibly freeing. And for the folks that we advocate alongside to see this and say 'no matter what we thought of you in that space as Coalition Coordinator [within LAJC], whether we thought you were a token or had autonomy, no question now - you're leading this thing and accomplishing those goals.' We're making change in the world of juvenile justice in Virginia." --RISE Executive Director

+ CONTEXT



Political: Money and political incentives do not support changing the juvenile justice system in Virginia.



Internal: After many transitions, RISE has developed into a strong team with a collaborative culture. Though they are small, they are dedicated and extremely effective.

+ KEY STRATEGIES

The community is the foundation of the campaign's work



Community Engagement

RISE educates and engages with communities to get them involved and participating in this work.



Youth-Adult Partnership

The campaign engages and invests in youth as whole people, developing their skills as leaders.



Strong Coalition & Partnerships

The campaign team has successfully built strong relationships.



Data-informed Approach to Educate Policymakers

Data and research have been essential to campaign efforts and have shaped the campaign's narrative.

+ PROGRESS

RISE's goals are to dismantle the school to prison pipeline, to provide alternatives to prisons, to educate and engage communities and policymakers, and to build community voice and power.



RISE has successfully shut down several new prison proposals, including Isle of Wight and Chesapeake.



In Spring of 2019, RISE held challenging and productive conversations about race and juvenile justice in community forums around Virginia.



RISE has provided holistic support to develop young leaders, and has developed successful relationships in the community and with policymakers.

"The biggest challenge is to motivate the community and educate people. People don't know where to go, or what to do...RISE offers a place where people can come and get answers for the problems they might be having with their young people." -- RISE Advisory Council partner

+ NEXT STEPS

RISE is persistent and in it for the long haul.



Continued Community Organizing

RISE is dedicated to bringing the community into everything they do, and creating a space that the community knows they can come to for support.



Youth Leadership

RISE aims to build a pipeline of strong youth leaders who can be hired as community organizers, work for partner organizations, and lead this work.



Creating a Political Taskforce

RISE is engaging volunteers and hopes to develop a structure for more people to engage and move pieces of the work forward outside of meetings.

Virginia Case: RISE for Youth Campaign

Background

As Virginia has increasingly shifted away from reliance on incarceration to the rehabilitation of youth, disparities between black and white youth continue to be stark: incarceration of white youth has decreased significantly, but it has actually increased for black youth over the same time period.⁵ RISE for Youth is a relentless advocate for impacted youth and communities and has made great progress since becoming an independent entity in the summer of 2018. While their central goals remain the same, they have developed a strong voice and built power with communities and with decisionmakers to achieve impressive wins towards dismantling the youth prison model and promoting the creation of community-based alternatives to youth incarceration. RISE focuses on:

- Stopping youth prisons from being built—especially far from youths' communities—and advocating for smaller, secure facilities close to communities that don't feel like prisons;
- Educating communities and policymakers about the harms of the current juvenile justice system, the benefits of restorative justice, and the importance of investing in communities; and
- Engaging the community so that they are involved and participating in this work.

Before becoming independent, RISE was limited by uneven power dynamics and a lack of autonomy to pursue their goals. Since transitioning, they have evolved to be truly community-led and have built power through effective youth development, strong relationships, targeted strategies, and persistence.

"It is helpful that RISE can now have a full-throated voice for abolishing youth incarceration." [Long-term RISE Steering Committee Member and Partner]

RISE leaders spoke about the freedom and autonomy of being an independent organization, and of the importance of working to dismantle supremacist structures alongside community without having to censor themselves.

"To truly be an organization led by people of color and allies... that has been incredibly freeing. We are pushing for the conversation to be had in the most impacted communities about how we work together...to bring the greatest good to the entire community. When you attempt to do those things without those voices present, there's something wrong with that. We're trying to get away from that patriarchal or supremacist ideology, whether that's white supremacy or any other supremacist ideology, which is one that says, 'I know how to fix you, you just sit back and let me.'" [RISE Leader]

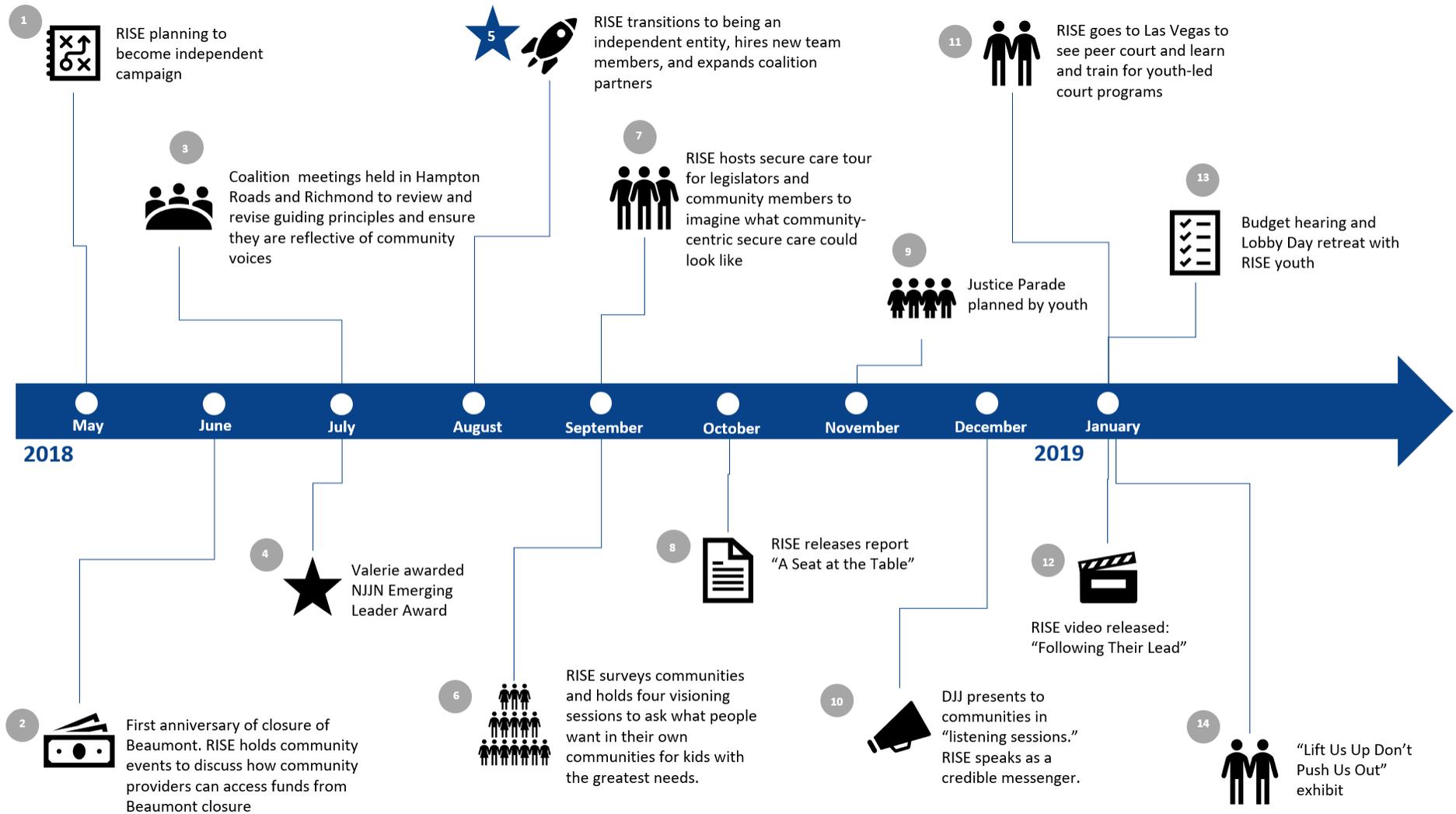
To individuals external to the campaign, RISE's focus is very clear: they are there for young people as fearless and honest advocates and leaders.

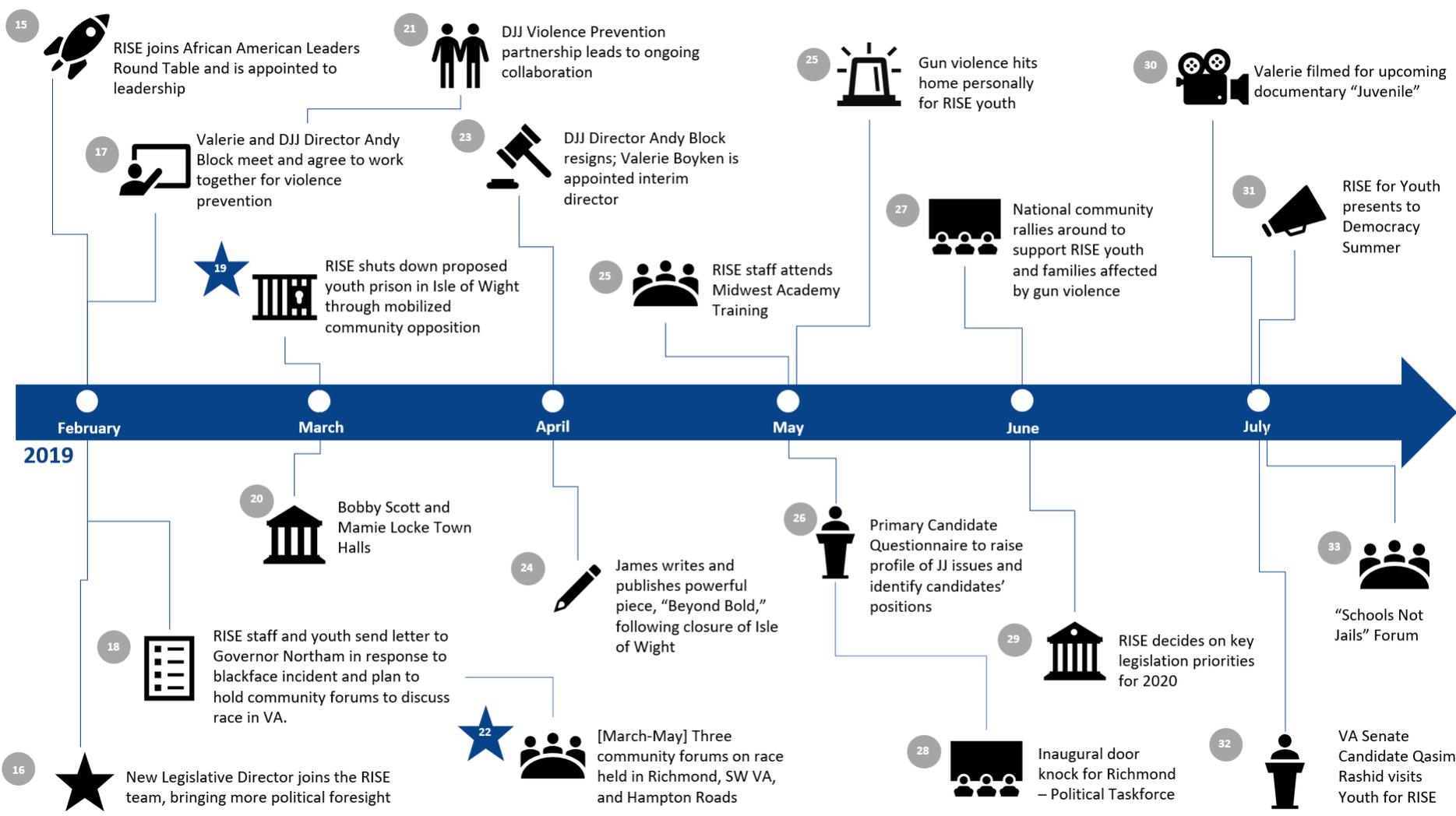
⁵ Source: <https://www.riseforyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Stop-Jim-Crow-Juvenile-Justice.pdf>

Campaign Timeline

Figure 1. Campaign Timeline (May 2018 – August 2019)

See the 2018 report for campaign timeline prior to May 2018





Successes

In 2019, RISE built out the infrastructure of the campaign and achieved significant successes in both concrete wins and ongoing relationship building, youth development, and community engagement. Successes include **stopping new youth prisons from being built in Virginia, sparking and facilitating productive and challenging conversations, developing youth leaders, and developing relationships with legislators and communities**. As RISE moves this work forward in Virginia, they are becoming part of a global movement to pull down the punitive juvenile justice system and replace it with something new.

"There is a paradigm shift happening in Virginia and RISE is on the forefront of making it happen." [RISE Leader]

Stopping new youth prisons from being built

The RISE team successfully mobilized community opposition to shut down the proposal to build a new youth prison on Isle of Wight as well as another proposed facility in Chesapeake. Beyond the success of stopping new youth prisons, there is also a greater impact in terms of community involvement and community voices being heard. Team members reflected that by shutting these projects down, they are showing the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) that decisions cannot be made without the community, and that they must bring people to the table and listen to their perspectives.

"If not for [RISE], there wouldn't be such awareness of juveniles being locked up. For example, they advocated that we don't need the Isle of Wight project, that we want kids back in community. And thanks to that campaign, that county said they're not doing it. That's big. It's built awareness for local level officials to see how they're treating youth in their city or county. A lot of local officials are on board now..." [Representative of the Department of Criminal Justice Services, Alternatives to Incarceration Program]

While RISE has succeeded in stopping new prisons, ongoing challenges remain as new prison projects continue to be proposed and there is still minimal investment in community-based services. For example, RISE's first major campaign success was the closure of Beaumont Prison in 2017; savings from this closure were meant to be reinvested in community solutions, but only small amounts of money have gone to community-based services as was originally allocated. RISE continues to advocate for increased reinvestment.

"We are always either getting a seat at the table and bringing community to it, kicking down a door and demanding space and bringing community in, or creating tables ourselves and inviting systems." [RISE Leader]

Sparkling and facilitating productive and challenging conversations

RISE has successfully elevated juvenile justice as a racial and social justice issue in Virginia. The team's ability to bring community voices to the table, present the issues backed by statistics, and truly welcome everyone willing to participate in challenging conversations, has been invaluable to their success. In the spring of 2019, RISE held three community forums throughout Virginia to discuss racial and social justice and the juvenile justice system, leading to RISE being recognized as leading voice on racial justice issues. This effort was planned in response to Governor Northam's blackface incident⁶ in January of 2019. RISE staff and youth leaders decided that they must respond by providing a public space to facilitate these hard conversations. A newfound openness to talk about race in Virginia after the blackface incident helped to make these conversations possible. One RISE Advisory Council member spoke about a City Council member being more willing to have meetings with community groups and to hear different types of proposals for alternatives to juvenile justice after attending a race equity forum in April.

Other strategies to raise awareness and spark conversation have included planning and executing RISE's annual Justice Parade, participating in events and forums to build relationships and exchange ideas with others in the field, producing educational communication tools, such as op eds, art exhibits, and participating in "Following Their Lead"⁷—a documentary about young people creating change—and working to redefine community safety and what a community model of public safety means.

"RISE has a gift at meeting everyone where they are and inviting them to the table – whether you're in a suit or in a t-shirt—not made to feel less than or like you're a stereotype, you're made to feel like you're part of the family and that you are NEEDED to move this work forward." [Member of the RISE Advisory Council]

Developing young leaders and providing holistic support

RISE has continued to develop youth leaders and support them in their own personal victories as well as their setbacks. RISE leadership creates spaces for youth to continuously lead, exposing them to new community partners and voices, and is also there for them in crisis (from court to housing to health issues). This includes weekly Saturday meetings to talk about resources and processes, bringing in speakers and new partners to educate and mentor youth, showing them that people with similar lived experience to theirs can move forward and succeed, and conducting advocacy trainings. Momentum with youth has increased instead of decreasing over time, which is unusual in this work. Youth participate in advisory council meetings, share their stories, are exposed to democratic processes, and take leadership roles. *"Usually when dealing with young people, some age out so you have to restart, you have to pull in new young people and then they drop off. After two years that usually happens, but RISE has young people who started at 17 and now they're 19 and still at the table. I think that speaks a lot about the leadership and genuineness of those leaders."* [Member of RISE Advisory Council]

⁶ "Gov. Ralph Northam admits he was in 1984 yearbook photo showing figures in blackface, KKK hood." Washington Post. February 1, 2019.

⁷ <https://www.bravenewfilms.org/youthinaction>

Developing relationships within the community

Since becoming independent, RISE has gone deeper into communities and developed relationships through consistent engagement in Richmond and Hampton Roads. RISE is now seen as a true resource to the community and community partners have become a part of RISE in ways that they weren't previously, especially in Hampton Roads. RISE is more accessible now through one-to-ones, small group discussions, and events. Beyond the coalition partners that have been involved with RISE from the beginning, including the Commonwealth Institute and YAP, Inc., advisory partners have expanded to include the Virginia Civic Engagement Table, Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, and Community Unity in Action. RISE is also making headway as a conduit between local community and the DJJ.

"It's really community driven. They don't end with community, they start with community, and that's powerful... they're consistent and firm, but don't do anything that is disrespectful. I've not seen where they have intentionally stepped on a political landmine. They are very well educated about the opinions of those who support their efforts and those who disagree." [Representative from the Youth Outreach Program, City of Hampton]

Developing relationships with legislators and seeing changes over time

In addition to building relationships with communities and making space for their voices to be heard, RISE has also built meaningful relationships with legislators and other decisionmakers, which they have leveraged into concrete advances and space for community voices. For example, the Executive Director of RISE leveraged a relationship from Let Her Learn to meet with a state representative, which led to the representative agreeing to co-sponsor legislation that RISE was pushing. In another case, a legislator reached out to a RISE youth to be an intern in her office. RISE has also built a strong relationship with the new Department of Juvenile Justice Director since the departure of the previous director. In general, RISE is holding more conversations with legislators, inviting them to engage with the community through efforts such as community forums, educating legislators through efforts such as hosting a "secure care tour" to imagine what community-centric secure care could look like, and seeing changes over time through their persistence. RISE members have become credible messengers and are viewed as a group that has power with communities.

"We lobby a bunch and talk to legislators and people who make laws. We do have people who actually agree with RISE... and are willing to ask for the things that RISE is asking for. We go every year, so we do see that change over time... Some legislators maybe didn't agree with it last year but maybe they agree with it this year. We keep showing them statistics until they have no other options." [RISE Youth]

One external respondent mentioned that people from around the country were amazed with a video that RISE shared at the CJJ conference in DC, and that RISE has everyone—elected officials, delegates, etc.—speaking the same language about juvenile justice: *"I've been in juvenile justice for 25 years and seen many*

campaigns die down real quick when they hit a roadblock. But with RISE they hit roadblocks, but they keep going. People think they're going to go away, but they don't, and when they come back, they have more people and more support. I don't know how they did it, but you've got elected officials, delegates, everybody speaking the same language now. I've never seen that in juvenile justice."

Factors of Success

Across all of RISE's work, two major factors have contributed to their successes: the ongoing persistence to educate communities and policymakers, and internal capacity.

Ongoing persistence to educate communities and policymakers

RISE is continuing to share data and engage in conversations with legislators year after year has changed opinions among some legislators. They work to illustrate how young people can be integrated in their communities with actual pictures of alternatives, including efforts such as the secure care tour. Legislators who did not agree last year may agree this year—RISE does not consider these viewpoints static but works to move people with data and statistics before putting legislation in front of them. RISE also works to educate communities so that they can actively engage and make their voices heard. By using the same message over and over to different groups, their consistency has led to more engagement and to RISE being seen as a knowledgeable community partner.

Internal capacity

Though small, the RISE team is extremely effective and after going through many transitions has developed into a strong team with a collaborative culture and the freedom to speak fully for abolishing youth incarceration. Valerie Slater is a great organizer and has been in her role as Executive Director for long enough to move the work forward and involve more and more people; James Braxton brings deep community experience, and the team hired a Legislative Director, bringing political foresight and strategy. They have built strong relationships with youth and everyone involved is deeply motivated by the work, open to experimentation, and committed to taking action collectively and in their own worlds (in the case of advisory members).

"What's been inspiring for me is that Valerie is just so committed... Other people drop the ball, but she doesn't drop the ball, which keeps our feet to the fire. We are always getting information, getting educated, and she's on top of it and keeps us on top of it. People are working, doing other things—but she gets us the information and then we get involved when it's important." [Member of the RISE Advisory Council]

Challenges

While RISE for Youth is consistently moving forward to change the juvenile justice system with impacted youth and communities in Virginia, they still face challenges every step of the way. Major challenges to this work include **politics, lack of resources – both for community-based services and for the campaign itself,** and the ongoing challenge of **keeping communities engaged and involved.**

Politics and the status quo

Respondents emphasized that money and political incentives do not support changing the system, but instead support the existing system of locking kids up. Politicians are averse to change, so it is challenging to shift their perspectives. There is strong resistance from the existing systems to allow advocates to have the space that they need to bring communities in—there is still the perception that RISE is in opposition to the DJJ overall, though this is not always the case. There is a need to build more trust, as well as build more relationships to the legislature to build power in the General Assembly and get commitments from legislators. While there have been changes in openness about talking about race at RISE’s forums, there have not been concrete policy changes. Respondents spoke about legislators not understanding the communities (often poor, low resourced, and mostly black) that they are representing. As one RISE youth indicated, *"You have a bunch of people who don't understand us making laws for us."*

Lack of resources for community-based services

Community-based services do not receive enough funding, and this relates to the political challenges in the state; funding to support programs in the community for children and families is bottlenecked by elected officials. Yet mentors exist in the community and, as one respondent mentioned, if more grassroots programs were funded in the community—from learning a trade to starting a business—then youth wouldn’t be facing the same problems to the same extent. As a member of the RISE Advisory Council indicated, *"Funding small grassroots programs means you would have programs to send kids to for mentorship, then you wouldn't need facilities to address juvenile justice."*

While the money from Beaumont’s closure didn’t go to the types of organizations that RISE hoped and advocated for, the DJJ and the State Department of Public Safety continued to promote "evidence-based services," which include things like ankle bracelets, effectively holding public relations campaigns for the status quo that RISE and other community advocates are working to change.

Lack of resources for the RISE campaign and advocacy in general

In terms of RISE’s work, they are always facing time and funding constraints, as well as the risk of burnout among youth and staff. It is challenging to find and keep good organizers, causing internal transitions, and youth get tired of coming due to the slow-moving nature of this work. More funding would help to keep both organizers and youth engaged, if they could be paid sufficiently for their time. In addition to funding challenges, there is the challenge of emotional and creative capacity as well—only so many pieces of work can be pushed forward at a time, and staff don’t have the capacity to respond to everything. Additionally, youth from impacted communities have many needs and it is time consuming to support them sufficiently. While RISE staff have good relationships with the young people currently involved, they need a dedicated role to drive Youth for RISE’s work forward and structurally tie it to campaign work, as well as more funding for capacity around supporting youth development, and providing transportation and other logistical supports. RISE staff spoke of the need for a communications specialist and a youth development specialist, specifically.

Lastly, in the field there is competition between advocates. While they should be supporting each other and lifting up each other’s work, lack of funding and a need to show their contributions make advocates push back against each other as they vie for space instead of lifting up each other’s work.

"Advocates themselves can sometimes push back against other advocates not because they aren't doing good work, but because you feel like your work isn't getting the spotlight. It is a challenge within advocacy world to truly lift up each other in positive ways for people to see each other and themselves as part of the good, not vying for space in the good. We are working to change that framework and view." [RISE Leader]

Community engagement

Several respondents spoke about the challenge of bringing people together and keeping them involved, encouraged, and inspired. This work is challenging and requires endurance, as reforms are slow and the narrative about juvenile justice is negative towards impacted youth. There is apathy in the community, as people feel that their voices don't matter and that they aren't heard. RISE is trying to change this dynamic, but the community does not change easily. There is a need for healing in communities. As stated by a member of the RISE Advisory Council, *"Not always easy bringing people together and to keep them involved, the challenge is just always keeping things going and keeping the community together, encouraged, inspired... even if justice goes slowly, we can't stop."*

Strategies: Youth-Adult Partnerships & Community Engagement

RISE for Youth is committed to being youth- and community-led and to educating both communities and elected officials about what the current juvenile justice environment is and what is needed to truly support youth in Virginia. They are working towards systemic change, not surface-level solutions. To this end, they prioritize cultivating strong youth-adult partnerships and engaging communities to fully participate.

Cultivating Strong Youth-Adult Partnerships

In reflecting about their own work building youth-adult partnerships, the RISE team talked about their successes and challenges and how best to support and develop young leaders. They described what strong youth-adult partnerships should look like at each stage of engagement – (1) the first time young people learn about and engage with the campaign; (2) young people have started engaging in campaign activities; and (3) young people are taking leadership roles within the campaign – and then talked through how this actually looks for the RISE campaign, and what they might be able to do to strengthen this work.

RISE's vision of what an ideal youth-adult partnership **should** look like at each stage:



First Contact

Adult is open, inviting, and perceptive about the level of action that a young person needs. Youth and adult are getting to know each other as people, not with programs or services.



Started Engaging

Young people are provided with a safe space so they know they can be honest with adults; trust and boundaries are essential. Each youth has an eight- to twelve-week development plan.



Youth as Leader

Adults support youth with facilitation, skills development, and political education, while youth have more space to make decisions. Young people internalize their roles in the campaign.

The campaign discussed what youth-adult partnership looks like **in reality** at each stage:

FIRST CONTACT

The team reflected that RISE does a good job of being open and inviting to new young people when presenting about their work to other groups, but that inviting new young people into the space when there is already programming happening for RISE youth is challenging (e.g., grief counseling after an incident of violence). This first stage with new youth should focus on relationship building, and this isn't the case if other things are going on.

The RISE team has found that free flowing activities seem to work best to get young people involved, especially in the beginning. Youth become less engaged the more structured and rigid it becomes. Instead of rigid programming, the focus must be on building relationships and meeting youth where they are.

"We work with young folks who have had system involvement, lived the traumatic life experiences of economic and educational violence. Violence, because they were deprived in ways that could have been avoided by better support from the state. Their resilience and ability to rise above all these challenges, meet with us where they are, and grow—we've had young folks who have experienced homelessness and other really devastating life challenges, and they show up and do the work to make change." [RISE Leader]

STARTED ENGAGING

As young people become more engaged, this work includes a lot of crisis intervention. While RISE provides continuous opportunities for youth to lead and to put themselves out there, they are still at the stage where RISE staff are creating the space for youth to lead and supporting them to find the leader within themselves. RISE adults must constantly remind youth who they are as advocates, including accountability, discipline, and to think critically about how they act in spaces as leaders.

"The main thing that keeps youth coming back is that they have people who have been through it and they're here to listen to them and help them... in leadership positions, not just volunteers. They see that they don't have to just be an auto mechanic or work at a fast food joint because they have this on their record, they can be a director like James and go to Richmond and DC. That means a lot for a young black man or young person of color. The possibility, the hope and expanding the imagination of what's possible."

[Member of the RISE Advisory Council]

YOUTH AS LEADER

RISE youth are participating in a consistent way by attending trainings, facilitating conversations and events. However, while they have internalized their role in the organization, they haven't internalized their role in the campaign. RISE youth include several young men who have been systems-involved and young women who are advocates but have not been systems-involved. The team reflected that they need more staff support to recruit new youth deliberately, specifically young women who has been system-involved and young people who have the social skills to relate to and unite both groups.

There is a clear need for more funding and staff focused solely on young people in order to most effectively support and develop RISE youth. This work is all-consuming and no one person can fully support young leaders who are impacted to meet all their needs.

Engaging Communities

RISE prioritizes building relationships and inviting the community into everything they do.

STRATEGIES

Facilitating dialogue: Community forums, using art as advocacy, holding peaceful protests and marches, engaging in many conversations, and surveying communities to ask what their priorities are have been effective strategies for facilitating dialogue. RISE has become a trusted entity by not just advocating, but also directly serving youth and deeply engaging in communities to facilitate challenging conversations. Respondents emphasized the need to have opportunities for community members to participate, to make things fun (e.g., food, music, and games), and to get the word out that the campaign exists and can provide information and resources.

Education: The campaign shares information and educates communities about what alternatives to secure care could look like and what is happening in other states. RISE conducted a candidate questionnaire to create report cards on where candidates for public office stand on RISE's issues. By offering concrete and low-effort ways to partner, RISE builds relationships with other advocates and is seen as a collaborative leader. As one RISE staff member indicated, *"It's an election year, so before primaries...we're holding potential legislators to the fire to give us a clue who they are related to these issues. We created a space for all the folks we want to be in collaboration with to add questions that they want to have answered – this created collaboration in a light but tangible way... We're not vying for space, we are part of a blanket of advocacy, shouldn't be pitted against each other over specific issues."*

Engaging unlikely allies: RISE collaborates with a wide range of partners, including unlikely allies such as victims of crime (e.g., Mothers of Murdered Sons and Daughters). Bringing in the voices of those harmed by youth gives the team greater credibility and empathy in the work that they do.

Leveraging existing relationships: RISE staff have existing relationships in communities, which makes it easier to engage. James has connections to grassroots organizations in Newport News and Hampton Roads. He has a compelling voice in those spaces and has reached out to those who have contributed to gun violence to meet with them one on one, pulling in the people who are picking up the guns to include them in the conversation and get them involved in solutions. All of this contributes to RISE being a credible voice. They've also been successful at hiring people with local knowledge and putting community leaders on the advisory board, and have built strong partnerships with community leaders and local organizations in high sending areas (e.g., Hampton Roads and Richmond).

Working with the system to bring community in: RISE is working with the system to build out a violence prevention initiative, build bridges, and include community in everything, bringing community into city council meetings, town halls, and other spaces within the system.

CHALLENGES

Respondents mentioned that good partnerships are being built in several communities, but also that RISE has gone deep in a few places rather than broad in many, and still has a lot of work to do around the state where many communities don't know about them. RISE faces an ongoing challenge to get the word out so that the community knows to come to them. One significant external challenge is the environment that youth (and their parents) have grown up in—parents don't know what to do with their young people when they can't control them, and RISE seeks to be a resource.

" There's internal division – community members separate themselves from the problem because it's so overwhelming... there's no ready answers and it's easier to say, 'that's not my problem, not my kid,' while they're literally two doors down from each other. I think education and healing/trauma resources need to funnel into those communities, because we can talk about policy and legislation all day and what works and what doesn't work, but someone needs to come out and heal us. Not only the children but the parents as well." [Member of the RISE Advisory Council]

PRIORITY COMMUNITIES

The team identified key communities that they work to engage, including churches, legislators, community providers, youth groups, local officials, crime justice reform advocates, other advocates with intersecting issues, and unorganized community members. They prioritized the four most important groups to work on their engagement with and reflected on the importance of these groups and their challenges and efforts to engage them.

- **Legislators and local officials:** This group has decision-making power and influence, and there is room for RISE to develop stronger relationships to gain support with the General Assembly to generate monetary investments for youth and push forward RISE's goals. The team reflected that they are not doing as well with this group and must look for opportunities to find common tactical

ground to build relationships, organize constituents, and engage legislators by inviting them to attend site visits and by hosting advocacy days in the Capitol. Bringing in a new Legislative Director has helped to push this work forward strategically and discerningly.

- **Youth groups:** If RISE is advocating for youth, then they must work with young people to understand them. RISE must engage and educate youth about the system so that they can grow into the next generation of leaders. The team reflected that they are doing pretty well engaging youth groups but could improve by partnering with other groups that work with youth to recruit for RISE and by hiring a full-time staff member to take on this work.
- **Faith groups:** Faith groups have moral authority and the ability to mobilize large membership bases. They are often the heart of communities impacted by the justice system, have the capacity to provide services to families, and are seen as community leaders. The team reflected that they are doing very well engaging this group by attending their events and inviting them to attend RISE's events, agreeing to serve on leadership teams, and inviting faith leaders to serve on the advisory council. They could improve by positioning RISE as a connector and cultivating deeper engagement with faith leaders who are invested in the community and see RISE's value.
- **Other advocates:** Advocates focused on other issues have relationships with their own members and policymakers and can broaden RISE's base, further their reach, and strengthen their voice. Advocate groups must be united across issues so that they share resources and connect to other community leaders who are often resources. The team reflected that they are doing well with this group, but that with so many relationships to manage, some are not as strong as they would like them to be. They aim for juvenile justice to be seen as an important issue for advancing justice overall in Virginia, framing this work through a racial justice lens and working intersectionally to strengthen relationships.

Looking Forward

Moving forward in this work, the team is most excited to continue bringing the community, including youth, parents, and others, into spaces of decision making and everything they do. They are working to make space for and build a pipeline of youth who have the skills to be hired by community organizations, engage in city council meetings, and lead this work. They are working with families to address their needs, offering a place to come, talk, and find solutions and resources. One RISE leader stated, *"I'm most excited about actively working to create spaces for young people in places like city councils and on school boards and on general assembly boards... [They] won't be able to say that kids don't get it, don't understand – that's not going to be a fallback."*

They are also excited about engaging with legislators in new ways, and about building up a base of volunteers who cannot just respond to an ask but can also continue the work between meetings and become a political task force. A member of the RISE Advisory Council stated: *"[We're] excited about the fact that we're bringing more attention to the needs of our communities and the people inside those communities. Getting knowledge about different ways and more bipartisan legislation... Not along party lines, because a lot of Democrats believe in the juvenile justice system as strongly as Republicans! More conversations and more training on how to make community members candidates and not just voters!"*

The team also sees a lot of challenges to moving this work forward, including needing more money for the campaign, being visible so that community knows they can come to them, building relationships with unlikely allies and helping people who have no understanding of impacted youth, such as tenured elected officials, understand the issues better.

As RISE continues to work towards justice for youth in Virginia, other campaigns can learn from their successes, including the need to start with community, provide checks and balances to the DJJ by informing and educating the community, and focus on the local government, not just on the DJJ director.