

**Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force
Law Enforcement Stakeholder Roundtable
October 7th and November 11th, 2020**

On October 7th and November 11th, 2020, the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force hosted roundtable discussions with 21 law enforcement stakeholders from across the commonwealth. The meeting was facilitated by Task Force member Kevin Bethel, special advisor and chief of school safety for the School District of Philadelphia.

➤ ***Strengths of the Juvenile Justice System:***

- **Positive interactions with school resource officers (SROs):** One participant shared that, compared to recent years, SROs now have a more positive relationship with both administrators and youth. The participant noted that in the past SROs only came into schools or interacted with youth to sanction them, but that now they are coming into the school for good reasons and to check in with youth. One participant also noted that SROs have showed a “willingness to work with others to improve outcomes for youth.”
- **Youth Aid Panels help divert youth from the juvenile justice system:** Participants shared that Youth Aid Panels are a helpful tool when trying to divert youth from being formally processed by the juvenile justice system. One officer reported that they will refer youth to a Youth Aid Panel so that they can “learn from what they’ve done” and not “get in trouble...[or] have a mark on their record for the rest of their life.”

➤ ***Areas in Need of Improvement:***

- **Decrease arrests of youth for low-level offenses, especially for youth with mental health diagnoses or other challenges:** Several participants shared that they would like to decrease the arrests of youth for low-level offenses, particularly offenses resulting from mental health concerns or manifestations of disability. A participant commented that they “have some supports for mental health but a lot of those incidents lead to possible arrests.” Another participant noted that “mental health is something we need to address. Children are coming from all types of homes/backgrounds and we’re automatically criminalizing them without understanding the why. There has to be another avenue, another direction we can go. There’s an opportunity to put the juvenile justice system on the right path with programming and addressing needs.” Participants described the lack of alternatives for referring youth into the justice system for law enforcement officers in response to youth behavior. “There will always be some occasion where a kid is doing some kind of behavior that is technically a crime,” one participant said. “There are two options: No citizen wants to hear ‘there’s nothing I can do.’ The only other option is ‘click click, let’s go kid.’ There are no immediate interventions that can be brought to bear. But that creates a progression of behavioral change that can’t be remedied after that initial act was done.”
- **More youth should be diverted from being charged in the juvenile justice system:** Participants shared that there are a lack of diversion opportunities to prevent youth from ending up in the deep-end of the juvenile justice system for minor offenses like retail theft. According to

stakeholders, arresting these youth does not “drill down to the root causes [for why] youth are committing these offenses.” Moreover, one participant shared that there is a “need to collaborate to address health and safety outcomes.”

- **Eliminate the use of arrest for young children:** A number of participants lamented the practice of arresting youth as young as ten. “We lock up ten-year olds because we can, and if somebody said we couldn’t, we wouldn’t.” Another participant commented on the unseen consequence of this action, “you don’t understand the impact it has on an officer when they’re forced to take in a ten-year-old child.”
- **Officers need more training and resources to address trauma that youth are facing:** Law enforcement stakeholders shared that they “do not have the resources to address trauma, to check on families, to see if the outcomes we are shooting for are working,” and don’t know if what they are doing is “really contributing towards justice and fairness.” One participant commented that there is a need for “social workers and psychologists in [the] schools and embedded in [their] police departments to help reduce trauma.” Another shared that “not every officer that interacts with a child has the skills or tools to interact effectively with a child.”

➤ **Notable Quotes:**

- **On law enforcement training:**
 - “I’ve talked to younger officers over the years: once you write a ticket and make an arrest, you walk away from it but you don’t know the process that that youth or family goes through monetarily and for how long. We need to educate officers to take a more communal approach because we’re living with these kids and families in the communities. You don’t have to arrest anyone. Locking people up for small offenses—maybe that can be a teachable moment and can help bridge the divide between the police and community.”
 - “Make sure the officers are educated on what can happen long term for the child and the family once you make an arrest. When you’re at a point at an officer of “what do I do with them?” you take the quickest option—you arrest them for small things, without realizing the costs, financially, fiscally, emotionally for that youth. We have to hit the people making the arrests and make them understand the repercussions of their action.”