

STEP

3.

What Do You Want to Achieve?:
Deciding How to Tackle the Issue
and Developing a Theory of Change

TIME TO COMPLETE: 1-3 MONTHS

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One of the most important early steps in planning your campaign is answering the question “What do we want to achieve?” Answering this question—and conducting an analysis to determine the best approach—helps you set your mission and objectives, and it determines your overall theory of change for achieving them.

Youth First has identified three major approaches or pathways to decarceration that campaigns can use (alone or in combination):

1. **Closing youth correctional facilities.** This can be accomplished through:
 - State legislation
 - State budget action
 - Executive branch action (e.g., a governor issuing an executive order)
 - Litigation (facility closure due to a lawsuit is rare, e.g., in extreme instances of documented issues of deplorable conditions in a facility)

2. **Stopping the flow of young people into facilities/decarceration.** This can be accomplished through:
 - State legislation (e.g., limiting who can be incarcerated)
 - State juvenile justice agency action (e.g., policy or regulation limiting who can be incarcerated)
 - County-level judicial or court action (e.g., court rules/leadership on incarceration, or decisions by individual judges)
 - Probation supervision changes (e.g., prohibiting incarceration as a result of technical violations which result in youth being locked up)

3. **Investing in and/or creating alternatives to incarceration.** This can be accomplished by:
 - The state directing its federal funding or investing its state funding in alternatives
 - The state creating fiscal incentives and/or initiating capacity-building efforts for a continuum of care of alternatives
 - Counties applying for state funding, investing their own funds, and/or utilizing fiscal incentives
 - Counties supporting the creation of alternatives and contracting with programs that can provide them

Ultimately, each campaign will likely engage in all three approaches, but at the outset it is useful to determine which one will serve as the main focus and entry point into the work. It’s like having three doors into a house; you will eventually use them all, but which one

will you use first and most often? That will answer the question of how you plan to tackle the issue.

Your **theory of change** is the core guiding principle of your campaign. It represents your values and you will use it to establish the overall direction of your campaign. Throughout your campaign, it will help guide whether the strategies and tactics you consider make sense for your campaign.

One of the best ways to establish which pathway to take or approach to emphasize and a theory of change about how you will do the work is to organize a brainstorming session. Tips for a successful brainstorming session:

- Be sure to involve everyone in your group in the preparation for the session and the follow-up activities afterwards.

- Set an objective for the session, such as establishing at least 3 goals for your campaign.

- Include some time at the beginning of the meeting to recap the information you have gathered thus far.

- To inspire your group, consider sharing information from other successful campaigns or inviting a campaign organizer from a nearby state to talk about his or her experiences, especially around how they decided to tackle the issue. (You also can share written descriptions of other successful campaigns before or during your meeting (see www.youthfirstinitiative.org for examples).

- If your campaign has the resources, consider bringing in an outside individual who can act as a facilitator.

Your campaign should also have a **mission statement** and **values/principles statement**. Here are some examples from campaigns in Virginia and Wisconsin:



***RISE for Youth** is a statewide, nonpartisan campaign coalition whose central goal is to develop a continuum of community-based alternatives to incarceration that will keep juvenile justice system involved youth closer to their homes and support networks while making our communities safer.*



***Youth Justice Milwaukee** is a broad-based campaign advocating for the creation of community based, family-centered, restorative programs as an alternative to locking up children in Wisconsin prisons.*

Our long-term goal is to close the Lincoln Hills, Copper Lake, and Mendota youth prisons and reinvest in community programs that build true safety for our city.

Youth Justice Milwaukee adheres to the following ten core principles in our work to ensure a fairer, safer, more effective, more cost-efficient juvenile justice system in Wisconsin. These principles are grounded in research that shows that our over-reliance on incarceration and confinement does not work for young people and does not make our communities safer. Instead of getting the support they need in the communities they come from, these young people are funneled through a system that is inhumane, unsafe, costly, and full of racial and ethnic disparities.

- 1) We will center young people and families in our advocacy for transforming the juvenile justice system.
- 2) We will only achieve true public safety when we promote everyone’s well-being and when young people have the opportunity to heal and thrive.
- 3) We believe in trauma-informed, restorative, community-centered approaches that use the least restrictive environments available.
- 4) We believe in keeping families together and building solutions with the entire family.
- 5) We do not write off or give up on youth – young people deserve unconditional love.
- 6) We believe that we should treat youth and families with the utmost dignity and respect.
- 7) We will be culturally sensitive, humble, and seek to eliminate racial and ethnic bias.
- 8) To achieve racial equity, we have to transform the way the justice system treats youth of color from their first interaction with a police officer and in every part of the system.
- 9) To achieve real and lasting change, we should not only seek to move people in positions of power, but also to build power in our communities.
- 10) We will root our work within the larger social, historical and political context and work to make sure the community sees these larger systems.

Strategic Approach	Benefits	Drawbacks	Ensuring Success
Closures	<p>Allows for a direct attack on the system (showing the system as a whole doesn't work, rather than talking about who should/shouldn't be incarcerated)</p> <p>Focusing on what's bad about the system provides a tangible rallying point</p> <p>When you can name the problem (e.g., a specific youth prison), it's much easier to organize to fix it</p> <p>Can free up millions of dollars in funding to invest in alternatives</p>	<p>Often leads to opposition from unions/staff and local lawmakers</p> <p>Staff may try to sabotage your efforts, e.g., by increasing violence within the facility or letting youth escape</p> <p>Employment concerns in the town where the facility is located can cause resistance and must be addressed</p> <p>This is a heavy lift</p> <p>Public concerns about safety, especially if it is the last facility in the state</p>	<p>You must be strategic in choosing facility/ies to target</p> <p>Assess where your opposition will be</p> <p>Recognize that this is not a system “insider” approach</p> <p>Gear up before going public. Once you call for closure, expect tremendous opposition</p>
Stop the Flow/Decarceration	<p>Does not require a direct attack on the system</p> <p>Can be accomplished with less conflict/confrontation</p> <p>Can be accomplished with action at the state and/or county level</p> <p>Can be an important first step toward closure</p>	<p>Will not necessarily lead to facility closures</p> <p>Won't reach all populations</p> <p>Harder to rally around, because it's less concrete</p>	<p>Consider the value of short-term wins vs. long-term goals</p> <p>Plan for the positive aspects of a county-level focus on specific policymakers (who know you and may be more supportive) as well as the negative (leaders and staff will change)</p> <p>Consider how to ultimately embed these changes in state policy</p> <p>Engage in creative advocacy (e.g. educate judges about prisons and encourage them to refuse to send youth)</p>
Invest in/Create Alternatives	<p>A positive/strengths-based approach</p> <p>Builds community capacity</p> <p>Creates investment and embeds resources in the most impacted communities</p> <p>Harder for government to pull out once invested</p> <p>Could also inform rationale for closure</p>	<p>Limited funding availability/ need to identify where the funds will come from</p> <p>Sufficient local capacity/ providers may not exist due to previous lack of investment, support</p>	<p>Start thinking about the alternatives as soon as possible</p> <p>Draw on existing expertise (in your community and nationally)</p> <p>Develop recommendations on how to fund alternatives</p> <p>Simultaneously work to build community capacity</p>

This process should involve *as many of your campaign members and other stakeholders as possible*—both so that they feel invested in the campaign long-term and so that you can benefit from the expertise and insights they bring. As discussed earlier, this should include directly impacted youth and families, community members, and stakeholders who are affected by youth incarceration and/or are working to improve outcomes on related issues (e.g., education or health stakeholders).

Tip: **It’s never too early to think about a home for your campaign**

You will likely find it easiest and most effective to start your campaign as a project of an existing nonprofit, using that organization to house and support the campaign in its early stages. Once your campaign is further along, you can always make the decision to separate into a separate legal entity. Just choose your “host” carefully, to ensure that your campaign is able to operate independently (with its own governance structure) and that it will not be pressured by concerns about government funding or preserving relationships with policymakers or private funders. (Also revisit the considerations around structure and governance discussed above.)

Tip: **Be explicit about racial injustice**

The racial and ethnic disparities in a jurisdiction’s youth prisons can be easy to prove if data are publicly available, but how to address those disparities effectively as part of a campaign for change can be much more difficult. Among the campaigns profiled in the Youth First Initiative’s Breaking Down the Walls report, those who did explicitly address racial injustices reported that it was essential to their campaign’s success; some of those who did not do so expressed regret and the feeling that not doing so was a missed opportunity.

Tip: **All of the steps in this guide build on each other**

You will need to revisit the work and learning in each step throughout the process of building and launching your campaign. For example, the information, insights, and data you gathered in Step 1 should inform your theory of change and goals, and the process of developing the theory of change and goals should highlight what additional research may be needed. The leadership/governance structure you choose should allow you to set goals and determine your theory of change, but the goal-setting process may also highlight tweaks that need to be made or additional functions or stakeholders that need to be brought in.

Goal-setting for success:

1.) **Think Big and Bold!**

Consider what it is that you really want your campaign to accomplish. You are focusing on how to end the incarceration of youth in your state, so what “goal” would have the most impact? Don’t limit your thinking at this stage in the process. Consider the biggest and boldest goals as your long-term goals—such as closing your state’s youth prisons—and then consider medium and short-term goals that will help you get there, such as creating fiscal incentives to place youth in community-based alternatives rather than incarcerating youth.

2.) **What is a “Win”?**

In addition to setting big and bold goals to accomplish in the long term, you will need to consider what a “win” is at every stage of your campaign. These can be small or large victories, from the first month to the conclusion of your campaign, such as:

- **Month 6:** An editorial in your state’s major newspaper calling on the governor to close a youth prison this year.
- **Month 8:** A hearing at which youth testify about their experiences in youth prisons.
- **Month 12:** The governor making a public commitment to close a youth prison or passage of legislation in one body of the state legislature to limit the placement of youth in youth prisons.
- **Month 18:** Your state’s legislature creating fiscal incentives to place youth in community-based alternatives to incarceration.
- **Month 24:** The introduction of legislation to limit the placement of youth in youth prisons.
- **Year 3:** The closure of one or more youth prisons.

3.) **Use the SMART Goal “test”:**

One way to think about setting your goals for your campaign is to use the SMART Goal “test” with the goal you establish.

SMART stands for:

- S:** Specific
- M:** Measurable
- A:** Achievable
- R:** Results-oriented
- T:** Time-specific

As you consider setting your campaign goals, you will need to ask whether the goals you set are specific, measurable, achievable, results-oriented, and time-specific.