

STEP

9.

Messaging and Communications:
Harnessing the Power
of Public Opinion and Media

TIME TO COMPLETE: ONGOING

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Before publicly announcing your campaign, your core leaders and supporters will want to develop your key campaign messaging. Questions to consider include:

- Who are your audiences?
- What’s your main message?
- How can you effectively convey your message in a brief campaign name and tagline?

The essential pieces you need to have ready to use at your campaign’s launch are your campaign **name**, **tagline**, and **logo** (collectively these are your “brand” or identity). You’ll also want to have prepared:

- An overall campaign message that answers the question, “What do you want?” (e.g., *Prison is no place for our state’s youth*).
- The top three messages for your campaign that answer the question “Why”? (e.g., *It isn’t safe. It isn’t fair. It doesn’t work.*)
- A message that answers the “Who” part of your campaign? (e.g., *We are a coalition of youth, families, advocates, and allies who have joined together to ensure that our state shifts its priorities from incarcerating youth to serving youth in the community.*)

Here are some examples from current and past campaigns to close youth prisons:



Once you have the basics in place and have garnered some additional resources, your campaign should create these other communication vehicles:

- A website
- Social media accounts (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram)
- Campaign one-pager/flyer
- A dissemination plan
- A media outreach plan

Your campaign should set targets for communicating regularly with those outside your inner circle. For example, sending announcements/updates to a campaign e-mail list twice per month or posting to social media once per day. Additional communications strategies, including tips for effective communications with your campaign leadership and core supporters, are shared in later sections of this guide. Tag or tweet “at” key influencers to get your campaign and asks on their radar.

Tip: Social media toolkits are a great way to make it easy for your campaign supporters to spread the word. Choose a day or week to ask your allies to take action on social media, and provide them with some or all of the following: Hashtags, sample posts or tweets, resources/websites to link to, memes or other graphics. Make sure to keep in mind the different platforms people may use (e.g., Twitter limits the length of posts, Instagram posts must have an image and can be captioned but links will not work in captions).

Media and communications advocacy

Newspapers, radio and television news, and other forms of media can help you reach individuals who may be persuaded to support your goals but who are not already in your social networks. Having your issue covered by an impartial journalist also gives it more credibility. Your campaign launch will be your first major engagement with the media. Here are the key tasks that you will want to do leading up to that event:

- **Bring in expert assistance:** See if a local communications/public relations firm would be willing to donate their time to help, or if organizations in your coalition have communications staff who could support your efforts.
- **Build a list:** You’ll need to collect names and contact information for the relevant reporters at your local media outlets. Your campaign partners may already have these lists; if not, this is a great task to have volunteers help with.

- **Write a release:** A media advisory or press release will give reporters the relevant information before your big event, and it lets you tell the story of your launch immediately afterwards in your own words. Make sure to include pictures, as well as quotes from your campaign leadership and from impacted youth and families. Most importantly, include contact information for press to reach someone on your team—a cell phone number and e-mail address—as well as information on how the public can get more involved (e.g., your website or Facebook page).
- **Be ready:** Have fact sheets, papers, or reports with all of the information gathered in Step 1 ready to go, and release them shortly before your launch, or at the same time. Work with young people who have experienced incarceration and are willing to share their stories, so that they are prepared to safely discuss their experiences with the media.
- **Follow up:** Collect all of the media coverage you receive about your launch and share it with your supporters and targets (e.g., key legislators).

Tip: Social media is an important way to get the word out about your campaign launch, and it may also lead to media attention, as reporters frequently use social media to generate story ideas or find expert sources.

Here are some additional ideas to help you get media coverage for your campaign:

- Start a Storybank with stories of directly impacted youth and their families
- Put together a spokespersons bureau with directly impacted youth
- Create a media action team to promote social media and provide rapid response to press
- Meet with reporters and editorial boards
- Add questions to existing surveys and polls to gauge community support
- Invite media to direct actions and to cover legislative and policy events and actions
- Write and place letters to the editor and op-eds

Tip: If your campaign has members/allies who are willing to share their personal experiences with youth prisons, support those individuals as much as possible with media training, “strategic sharing” education, and the space to engage in self-care to avoid re-traumatization. Ensure that their sharing has maximum impact by linking it to an ask or to common themes that will support your campaign (e.g., missed opportunities).

Next Page: Sample Campaign Launch Press Release, Courtesy Youth Justice Milwaukee »

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Advocates Officially Launch Youth Justice Milwaukee, a Campaign to Close Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake Youth Prisons

MILWAUKEE – A coalition of community organizations, youth advocates and family members of youth involved in the juvenile justice system today officially launched Youth Justice Milwaukee (YJM), a broad-based alliance leading the fight to close Wisconsin’s dangerous and outdated youth prisons. YJM hopes to replace the prisons with community-based, family-centered, restorative programs that are proven to work better and cost taxpayers less money.

Overwhelming evidence shows that youth prisons are harmful, ineffective and excessively expensive, and a vast majority of Milwaukeeans agree. New poll data released today confirms that two-thirds of adults in Milwaukee County—of all political stripes—support shifting the focus of the juvenile justice system from incarceration to prevention and rehabilitation. YJM’s coalition of advocates will fight to translate this public support into expanded alternative treatment options in Milwaukee County that give youth the opportunity to repair harm to victims and communities, such as intensive rehabilitation, education, job training, and community service.

“Our current system relies too heavily on locking up our youth, which seriously damages their chances at recovery and future success,” **said Youth Justice Milwaukee’s Sharlen Moore.** “Far too often, young people leave Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake worse off than when they came in. There are better approaches, and we are dedicated to making alternatives available here in Milwaukee County and across the state so our young people, families, and communities have the chance to recover and thrive.”

Youth in prison are routinely subjected to maltreatment which can exacerbate trauma, limit learning, and lead to future recidivism. The rampant abuses at Lincoln Hills School for Boys and Copper Lake School for Girls have been widely documented, as they remain under investigation by the FBI. In recent months, allegations of sexual assault, use of pepper spray, strangulation and suffocation of youth, as well as destruction of public records, have renewed calls for the closure of these outdated, inhumane facilities. Earlier this year, the ACLU of Wisconsin and the Juvenile Law Center sued state officials on behalf of four teenagers, for cruel and unusual punishment at these facilities.

“There is mounting evidence that our youth justice system must be reformed,” **added Youth Justice Milwaukee’s Jeff Roman.** “However, the proposal to build a new youth prison in Milwaukee County is a huge step backward because it doubles down on a failed system and would be a waste of taxpayer dollars. That’s why we’re committed to community-based solutions that work better while saving money.” The new poll confirms widespread public support for alternative approaches that keep youth out of prison, finding that:

- * 90% support designing treatment and rehabilitation plans that include a youth’s family in planning and services.
- * 83% support providing financial incentives for states and municipalities to invest in alternatives to youth incarceration, such as intensive rehabilitation, education, job training, community services, and programs that provide youth the opportunity to repair harm to victims and communities.
- * 73% support requiring states to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the youth justice system.
- * 69% support increased funding to provide more public defenders who represent children in court.

The full poll results are available here. Prior to their official launch, YJM also released a list of recommendations for transforming Milwaukee’s broken juvenile justice system which can be found here.

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Youth Justice Milwaukee is a broad-based campaign advocating for community-based, family-centered, restorative programs as an alternative to locking up children in Wisconsin’s youth prisons. Youth Justice Milwaukee represents a coalition of persons who were incarcerated as youth, families of youth who are or were incarcerated, service providers, and local and national youth justice advocates.

"New York's Empty Beds, Wasted Dollars
campaign pushed a specific, targeted
media message: that the upstate facilities
were nearly empty and the state was
squandering millions of dollars to keep
these facilities open. The campaign also
wanted to expose the vested interests that
were pushing to keep the facilities open,
particularly the legislators representing
the districts where the facilities were
located. One tactic that the campaign
used to raise public attention to this
was to take out ads in the local papers
targeting specific legislators who were
opposed to facility closure. The advocates

also reached out to editorial boards and
columnists in all the major media markets
in New York State. To expose the waste
of the current system, campaign members
worked with the Office of Children
and Family Services to bring TV news
cameras into the near empty facilities,
which the unions and some upstate
facilities were fighting to keep open.
System stakeholders, including judges,
were allowed to tour the prisons so that
they could witness firsthand the damage
prisons cause to the children they ordered
to be held behind bars."

— *Breaking Down the Walls*