

Tips for Sustaining Long-Term Change

From [Breaking Down the Walls: Lessons Learned from Successful State Campaigns to Close Youth Prisons](#)

The lessons and stories presented in the Youth First Initiative's *Breaking Down the Walls* report are primarily based on the active phases of five successful reform campaigns—stopping when the campaign “won” the legislation it wanted or when a prison closed. Just as many of the campaigns had ups and downs, however, reforms don't always play out the way they are intended, and states and systems may backslide as leadership changes or public scrutiny recedes. Every one of the systems profiled, for example, still faces challenges, despite the improvements that were made. For that reason, it is essential that even after reforms are achieved and campaigns wind down, the youth, families and other advocates in a community pay attention to the following:

- 1) What is happening to young people now that the facility is closed? Are they being sent out of state or to other, equally bad facilities? Youth should be kept in their communities and homes whenever possible. If a residential placement is required, it should be the least restrictive appropriate setting, in small and developmentally appropriate facilities.
- 2) Are system leaders, relevant legislators, and other key decision-makers committed to a juvenile justice system that focuses on allowing young people to reach their full potential, rather than punishing youth or supporting private interests? Reform happens when a stakeholder (agency head, lawmaker, judge, etc.) takes up the mantle of de-incarceration, but stakeholders don't stay in their positions forever. Education and advocacy must be an ongoing effort so that positive changes can be sustained.
- 3) Are savings from juvenile justice reforms being recaptured and redirected into the community? Is the money following the youth and their families? Louisiana's reform legislation, for example, established a fund for monies saved by reducing the use of youth prisons, allowing the savings to be used towards prevention, early intervention, alternative sanctions, and other reforms.
- 4) Are more youth being sent to the adult (criminal) system? One repeated concern about juvenile justice reform is that it will lead to more young people being sent into the adult system. Although states across the country have raised the age of juvenile jurisdiction, there are still many ways youth can be transferred or waived into adult court, sometimes based on the discretion of a prosecutor rather than a judge. And when prosecutors or judges do not believe that the available juvenile court sanctions are sufficient to hold youth accountable for serious offenses, they may look to the adult system.
- 5) Are there any other unintended consequences that may have come about as a result of reforms? Advocates, system-involved youth, and families should continue to communicate and identify any patterns that may need to be addressed after the official end of a campaign.