

To: Youth First
From: BerlinRosen
Re: Continuum Messaging
Date: March 14, 2019

The below messages are intended to equip advocates with language to describe the elements of a continuum of care as a vital part of achieving a world without youth prisons. With your input, we're looking forward to using these messages to help advocates paint a compelling – and specific – picture of the alternatives to incarceration you are working to achieve.

MOVING BEYOND YOUTH PRISONS

- Youth prisons are outdated, ineffective, and costly – they focus on punishment instead of accountability. It's clear they just don't work.
- Imprisoning young people does not address the underlying issues which lead to contact with the justice system in the first place. Prison makes it harder for young people to finish school, get jobs in the future, and build the positive relationships that will help them become productive adults.
- Young people of color are disproportionately put in prison and behind bars despite offending at the same levels as their white peers. Prisons have become the default for youth of color when they are very rarely needed if at all.
- Community-based programs are the best way to help youth get back on track.
- Young people should be held accountable for their actions and make things right for their community and the people they've harmed. True youth justice gives young people an opportunity to repair the damage they've caused, while also healing their own trauma.

OUR VISION FOR A FUTURE WITHOUT YOUTH PRISONS

- Community-based alternatives to prison hold youth accountable and keep communities safe. Youth prisons are punitive and hold youth back instead of giving them second chances and helping them thrive.
- Closing youth prisons is the first step in the right direction, but we also need to invest in communities so we can begin addressing the underlying issues in young people's lives.
- Shifting resources toward education, job training, counseling, and other services is the best way to help young people stay on the right path.
- Providing youth with a range of community-based programs helps hold them accountable, helps address individual needs, and involves families and mentors in the rehabilitation process.

WHAT A CONTINUUM OF CARE LOOKS LIKE

- A better youth justice system holds young people accountable through a full range of supports and services that focus on support for families, access to education, mentorship, and help young people envision a better life.
- Everything must be on the table: housing and community revitalization projects in under-resourced neighborhoods, job and skills programs, counseling, genuine relationships with caring adults, and other healing-centered interventions proven to help youth and families stay on the right track.
- Healing means addressing root problems through mental health services, drug treatment, counseling, mentoring, and the support of culturally-competent case managers in the places where youth live. These components are critical parts of a youth justice system that promotes accountability and rehabilitation while preventing future crime.

EXAMPLES OF LARGE-SCALE CHANGE

- Our systems aren't designed to help young people when they need it most: before they get in trouble. But many youth can't access opportunities like mentorship until something happens, and that's the opposite of how it should be. States should be investing in young people before they get in trouble, not just after.
- There is no evidence that youth prisons effectively rehabilitate young people. That's why pioneering states have made significant investment into designing, planning and implementing a range of community responses. These supports and services have long-term impacts and have shown to be more successful than traditional systems.
- For example, New York demonstrated that accountability and healing are possible without youth prisons. Under the Close to Home initiative, representatives from city agencies – including probation, the court system, child welfare and education -- partnered with community organizations and advocated to plan and create a locally-operated continuum of community responses instead of sending New York City youth to state-run youth prisons. As a result, youth incarceration in New York City plummeted by 68 percent and youth arrests dropped by 52 percent.
- In Ohio, one county implemented an alternative to prison, Youth Advocate Programs, and reduced youth incarceration by 72 percent. Six months later, 68 percent of youth in the program remained arrest-free, a success rate significantly higher than prison – all while saving taxpayers \$50 million.
- Allowing youth to build relationships with peers and mentors, like the Roca program in Massachusetts does, has impressive results. Eighty-four percent of the more than 800 high-risk young men served by Roca in 2017 have had no new arrests, and 76 percent have held a long-term job.

EVERYONE BENEFITS

- States spend hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to lock up a single young person – and it doesn't work. By investing in better solutions, taxpayers save millions while communities grow stronger and safer.
- Closing youth prisons and investing in a continuum of community-based alternatives promotes racial justice. Even though young people of all backgrounds and races break rules at similar rates, youth of color are five times more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers. We all benefit from a fairer system.

- Prisons have become the default first response for kids of color, poor kids, and LGBTQ kids. It should be the very last resort – if considered at all. Dismantling the youth prison model leads to opportunities instead of obstacles for youth and makes our communities more equitable.

HOW WE GET THERE

- When states prioritize reinvestment in communities and creating a continuum of care to support youth, we see positive results.
- Dismantling the youth prison model is the first step. Elected officials and system leaders must partner with directly-impacted communities to design the full range supports and services to hold youth accountable, promote healing and justice, and ensure communities have the resources to implement their vision.
- An effective continuum of care puts communities at the center of the process so that the people closest to a youth can drive the outcome. Courts, parole officers, and other system-centric approaches just don't have enough context for each child to enable their success. Young people are individuals, and our solutions should address them individually.