

YOUTH JUSTICE COUNCIL

ACTION PLAN

2025

CHAIR

Zoie Simone

VICE CHAIR

Jack Gatkuoth

Each year, the Youth Justice Council creates their Action Plan by reviewing thousands of sticky notes collected directly from youth currently in foster care and the juvenile justice system. These notes reflect honest experiences and real ideas shared through interactive listening sessions across the state. As council members, we sort through these sticky notes, identify themes, and combine what we learn with our own lived expertise to decide what priorities to focus on for the year. This process ensures that our Action Plan is grounded in the voices of youth most impacted by the system and driven by youth leaders committed to making change. These are our 2025 Priorities:

1.

REAL SUPPORT FOR YOUTH

Support should be something youth can feel, not just something people talk about. Youth need real connection, people who listen, and help that matches what we actually need.

2.

CARE THAT CARES

Mental health shouldn't be one-size-fits-all. Youth want options, consistency, and to have a say in who helps us and how.

3.

KEEP US OUT OF THE SYSTEM

Don't wait until youth are deep in the system to care. Support youth early with mentors, jobs, opportunities and programs in our communities that actually show up for us.

4.

DIGNITY IN THE DETAILS

Youth in the system deserve their own underwear, nutritious food, and a place to sleep that feels safe and comfortable. Taking care of our basic needs shows that we matter.

5.

YOUTH POWER IN LAW AND POLICY

Youth and young adults with lived juvenile justice experience, including the Youth Justice Council, should be at the table when decisions are made about the juvenile justice system. Real change means listening and acting on feedback from youth who have lived it.

This content represents the opinions of youth in the State of Iowa Youth Justice Council and does not reflect the opinions of the State of Iowa Department of Health and Human Services.



Priority 1

REAL SUPPORT FOR YOUTH



1

EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL SUPPORT

- Use affirmations to recognize and uplift youth
- Offer quality food options that meet all youth's needs, especially youth with religious and dietary restrictions
- Provide a variety and enough food to youth
- Don't create rules or expectations unless youth are given the support to meet them
- Push for visiting and phone call policies that make it easier and more accessible for youth to stay connected

2

TRAINING AND EDUCATION FOR PROFESSIONALS

- Create a free online course on authentic engagement
 - Develop a Youth Justice Council certified badge or certificate for people who complete it
- Offer more breakout sessions and hands-on trainings that are intentional and have meaningful impact in real and respectful ways
- Host incentivized trainings for frontline staff on how to engage youth in out-of-home placement in real and respectful ways
- Host cultural humility trainings (led by youth partners like Audi)
- Make trainings required or offer pay so people actually attend
- Don't restrain youth. Create workshops with BHIS, therapists and schools to help frontline staff support youth through crisis instead of using restraints
- Make sure the right people in power are hearing about and backing this priority



Priority 2

MENTAL HEALTH



- Advocate for onsite therapy at every out-of-home placement
- Connect with detention centers and community for partnership opportunities to identify barriers and how to meet in the middle
- Advocate for youth to have the right choose their therapist, and identify how youth can keep the same one during their time in the system
- Provide activities to uplift mental health like self-care baskets
- Partner with local colleges to provide accessible educational opportunities
- Train mental health, medical and related professionals that serve youth on the importance of privacy and transparency
- Provide more opportunities for youth to speak about their health and mental health journey
- Advocate for coping skills that can transfer into the real world setting
- Advocate for other ways to heal (like music, art, animal therapy)
- Advocate to meet youth where they are when it comes to services

Priority 3

KEEP US OUT OF THE SYSTEM



- Help build stronger connections between schools, youth and the community
 - Create more free activities and safe places for youth in the community
 - Look for funding through community organizations and federal grants
- Expand and help support mentoring and tutoring for youth who are struggling
- Advocate for the expansion of Credible Messengers
- Advocate for Peer Support Specialists in schools
- Advocate for paid after school and summer jobs for youth involved in the system
- Keep partnering with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to help youth stay in their communities and to end the need for group care



Priority 4

DIGNITY IN THE DETAILS



1

BANNING SHARED UNDERWEAR

- Advocate that youth have their own underwear in detention and at the State Training School
- Finish proposal draft for Juvenile Justice Advisory Council to fund mini grants
- Talk to judges and detention staff about underwear policies
- Get new underwear donated (no one wants to wear used stuff)
- Help detention centers replicate Woodward's underwear practices

2

HYGIENE

- Advocate for a variety of quality hygiene products and practices (ensuring stalls have toilet paper, safe from mold, clean space, etc)
- Advocate for clothes to be washed with detergent that doesn't mess with youth's skin
- Advocate for longer showers (30 minutes minimum)

3

FOOD

- Advocate for bigger portions and healthier meals
- Advocate for the availability of food options
- Encourage more opportunities for youth to learn basic life skills such as cooking
- Connect youth with community food resources

4

SLEEP

- Promote quality sleep habits relating to youth development and mental health
- Advocate for later bedtimes for older youth
- Advocate for quality bedding, like softer sheets, thick mattresses that are comfortable, and real pillows



Priority 5



YOUTH POWER IN LAW & POLICY

- Make sure youth are involved in decisions that lead to systemic change
- Include youth in reviewing and revising requirements of hiring youth workers
- Testify, educate and advocate in support or opposition of policies that impact young people
- Advocate for more intensive background checks for foster parents and more frequent check-ins at foster homes.
- Push for a neutral, statewide grievance process that's taken seriously

The Youth Justice Council (YJC) plays a vital role in transforming the juvenile justice system in Iowa by ensuring that the voices of those who have directly experienced the system are heard and valued. YJC is composed of young people between the ages of 16-28 who have lived juvenile justice experience who creates their own priority areas and projects, provides recommendations to the Juvenile Justice Advisory Council, and advances youth engagement efforts within the juvenile justice system in Iowa.

Learn more about YJC here:

<https://hhs.iowa.gov/advisory-groups/youth-justice-council-yjc>

Council Members

Abby Phillips, Member, Council Bluffs
Arminta "Armi" Damken-Navarro, Member, Urbandale
Audi Wodrazka-Espinoza, Member, Sioux City
Genesis Almada, Member, Storm Lake
Gracie Johnson, Member, Ottumwa
Jack Gatkuoth, Vice Chair, Des Moines

Janiah Williams, Member, Des Moines
Jaquez Peace, Designer Co-Chair, Dubuque
Kuol Wor, Designer Co-Chair, Des Moines
Melvin Gaye, Recruiter, Urbandale
Monica Malek, Member, Des Moines
Zoie Simone, Chair, Johnston