

**We Urge the County of Los Angeles to  
End Probation Custody and Supervision of Young People  
and Strengthen and Expand the County's New Focus on Youth Development**

**We appreciate that the motion...**

introduced by LA County Supervisors Mark Ridley Thomas and Sheila Keuhl on Tuesday, August 13<sup>th</sup> will establish a Youth Justice Work Group to investigate how to move youth out of Probation custody and supervision.

We greatly appreciate that the motion moves forward our recommendation to remove youth from Probation's control, given our long-expressed concerns that Probation has neither the training or vision to provide young people with the care and programming to ensure their healthy development and healing, to prevent recidivism, or to reduce future violence or victimization.

**However, in order to achieve the results that system-involved youth  
and all youth need, the motion should...**

state that the goal is to **shift LA County toward a model of youth development**, that is strength-based, culturally rooted, connected to family and community, and that fully integrates transformative justice and trauma-informed care.

Youth development serves as an alternative approach to community health and public safety that builds on the strengths of youth, families and communities, addresses the root causes of crime and violence, prevents youth criminalization, recognizes youth leadership and potential, and turns young people's dreams into realities.

In addition to better ensuring the fair, safe and supportive treatment of court-involved youth, this strategy would have the added benefit of building an infrastructure for countywide youth development. There is currently no "home" for young people within the County of Los Angeles or most of its 88 cities. Too often, youth are invisible and forgotten *unless* they have contact with the police.

**Youth Development Is...**

Youth Development was established in the late 1800s in East Coast and Midwest cities as labor movements organized to eliminate child labor; immigrant communities argued for fair treatment, public education, housing, health care and opportunities for all youth people; and reformers advocated for the establishment of "juvenile" courts.

The field of Youth Development recognizes that there are  
**five essential skills**  
that all youth need to be healthy and successful in life:

1. **Health and Physical Competence** – Including giving youth access to healing, counseling, nutrition, sports, and recreation.
2. **Social Competence** – Building youth understanding of themselves, their culture, language and history; having self-discipline; being able to work and communicate with others; ability to have empathy for others and solve problems without domination or violence.
3. **Cognitive and Creative Competence** – Including critical thinking, analysis and problem solving; literacy, academic support and college preparation; and self-expression through visual and performing arts.
4. **Vocational Competence** – Including job preparation, youth employment and career exploration.
5. **Leadership Competence** – Including the right to speak out, and be a leader in transforming their schools and communities.

**Transferring system-involved youth from Probation custody to Mental Health, Health or Child Welfare is not youth development, will not provide youth access to these essential skills, and can also lead to significant harm.**

Youth Development is:  
**strength-based**

Youth development builds on the assets, talents and dreams of youth, their families and communities, while the fields of prevention, intervention and (mental health and drug) treatment focus on “fixing broken youth” and removing youth from “dysfunctional families and communities.”

Prevention, intervention and treatment most often define youth, (their families and their communities) by risk factors, problems, and criminogenic needs and “treat” youth for their assumed pathologies.

This often harms youth in significant ways, including:

1. Over-diagnosing, misdiagnosing and over-medicating youth.
2. Focusing solely on clinical or case management models that fail to build essential skills and talents of youth and their families.
3. Creating labels that further isolate youth from their communities, and create images of youth as “ill, problematic, or troubled” that can be as hard to shake as the labels of “criminal, delinquent or juvenile.”

4. Similarly, physically isolating youth in separate programs rather than maximizing their integration into schools and community programs with other youth.
5. Referring and/or segregating youth and their families into separate – and often contradictory – programs and services (such as programs addressing teen pregnancy, substance abuse, gangs, violence, mental illness, homelessness/foster youth/runaway, etc.) rather than providing an integrated service approach.
6. Replacing youth incarceration within dehumanizing juvenile halls and youth prisons with often brutal institutionalization within child welfare and mental institutions.
7. Transferring youth into systems that have even less oversight from courts, defense attorneys and the community, thus risking the entrapment of youth and their families in harsh, isolating and long-term monitoring or confinement.

For example, LA County Probation's assertion that "90% of the youth in custody have a mental health diagnosis" is based on youth exhibiting behaviors that are normal given their arrest, detention and separation from family including crying, being tense or being unable to sleep. Given the conditions and stress that system-impacted youth are experiencing, it is unlikely that an accurate mental health assessment can occur in custody. Whether under Probation or Mental Health custody, conditions matter.

## We can't get well in a cell.

Unlike other models whose primary focus is in prevention of problem behavior, youth development (YD) is a framework that supports holistic and asset-based development in all five essential skill sets listed above - multiple skill sets that are both preventative *and* developmental. **The goals of prevention, intervention, and treatment can be met through a youth development framework, but youth development cannot be achieved through prevention, intervention or treatment.**

Effective YD requires more than an individual program intervention, and focuses on building multiple strengths rather than only identifying and "fixing" problems. YD works best when entire communities offer youth development opportunities as part of their infrastructure. It also means that YD values and competencies are integrated into all the agencies that come into contact with youth, such as health clinics and hospitals, schools, DCFS foster care and shelters, courts and law enforcement.

**Across the world and in many US counties, youth development has replaced ineffective models of prevention, intervention and treatment.**

**Youth Development is:**

## culturally rooted

YD recognizes that violence and crime are rooted in generational trauma caused by racism, poverty, misogyny and heterosexism. In order to heal and transform youth, families and communities, it is essential that everyone learns, practices and celebrates their own history, cultural traditions and language; and gains understanding and appreciation for the culture of others

**Youth Development is:**

## transformative

YD teaches youth and others to solve conflict, take responsibility and make amends. Transformative Justice focuses on addressing the root causes of conflict and violence, and requires that each person builds greater empathy for others. It requires that each person do the hard work necessary to both heal and repair the harm that they have caused others.

**Youth Development:**

## centers youth within family and community

YD also brings a positive orientation to working with youth, families and communities, and is characterized by opportunities and discovery that promote a sense of belonging, usefulness, and power. YD is centered around:

- Fully engaging all youth and their family members as participants in planning their development; and
- Undertaking a collaborative effort with families and communities to foster each young person's physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social health.
- Placing programming, housing and other supports within communities, supporting community based, owned and operated youth development, and focusing on both youth and *community* development.

**Youth Development is:**

## accessible and welcoming to all youth

and does not exclude or negatively judge youth based on their race, ethnicity, documentation / status, national origin, language, ability to pay, ability to access transportation, proof of address or housing, physical or cognitive ability, gender and gender identity, perceived "gang" involvement, or criminal record.

The County of Los Angeles - including 88 cities, 138 unincorporated areas and 81 school districts - represents the richest economy in the United States, and contributes greatly to California's position as the 7<sup>th</sup> richest economy in the world. LA has long been recognized as the Entertainment Capital of the World; is the largest government center in the nation outside of Washington DC; and has more than 100 museums, has more than 87,000 fashion jobs, 700,000 health and biomedical jobs, and 190,000 aerospace and technology jobs – including the recent tech explosion in Silicon Beach. Los Angeles boasts many of the world's richest zip codes, and is home to more millionaires and billionaires than any other city on the planet. Nearly 50 million tourists visit the region each year, pouring nearly \$20 billion annually into the Los Angeles economy.

In order to ensure that youth and their families can access all LA County's opportunities and are not trapped in underground economies or under-resourced neighborhoods, **youth must have access to a free Metro pass for unlimited access to public transportation, all hours, year-around, K through college.**