

Stepping Up for Juvenile Justice in Kansas

Governor Laura Kelly, in collaboration with the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC), recently launched the nation's first juvenile justice-focused [Stepping Up initiative](#) to address the prevalence of behavioral health needs among youth in Kansas. Through this project, Kansas will receive technical assistance from [The Council of State Governments \(CSG\) Justice Center](#) to identify, implement, and expand best practices centered on reducing the use of detention and increasing connections to care for young Kansans with serious behavioral health needs who are at risk for or currently involved in the juvenile justice system. This project is intended to strengthen cross-system collaboration, improve outcomes for youth and families, and enhance community safety.

This work will build upon existing efforts to improve outcomes for Kansas youth in the juvenile justice system, including the funding of youth crisis centers and implementation of [Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative \(JDAI\)](#) sites. It follows the model established by the successful Kansas Stepping Up Technical Assistance (TA) Center. Kansas continues to lead the nation in demonstrating effective ways to promote safety and positive outcomes for communities. As the first state in the country to expand the Stepping Up initiative to the juvenile justice system, Kansas is at the forefront of innovation in the field and demonstrating a steadfast commitment to improving outcomes for youth.

- Nationally, **an estimated 7 out of 10 youth** in detention have a diagnosable mental health condition.¹
- In fiscal year 2022, there were **6,850 youth** taken into custody by law enforcement in Kansas.²
- Approximately **45 percent of youth** admitted to the Kansas Juvenile Correctional Complex require a behavioral health treatment plan.³

¹ Development Services Group, Inc., "Intersection Between Mental Health and the Juvenile Justice System," (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2017), <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Intersection-Mental-Health-Juvenile-Justice.pdf>.

² Kansas Juvenile Justice Oversight Committee 2022 Annual Report (Topeka, KS: Kansas Juvenile Justice Oversight Committee, 2022), <https://www.doc.ks.gov/juvenile-services/committee/jjoc-annual-reports/2022-annual-report>.

³ Collette Marcellin, Samantha Harvell, and Hannah Love, "Data snapshot of youth incarceration in Kansas" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2020), <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102130/data-snapshot-of-youth-incarceration-in-kansas-2020-update.pdf>.

Initiative Objectives

KDOC and the CSG Justice Center will partner with state and local policymakers and system leaders in Kansas such as the Governor’s Behavioral Health Services Planning Council, Office of Judicial Administration, Department for Aging and Disability Services (KDADS), Department of Children and Families, National Alliance on Mental Illness, service providers, local JDAI sites, people with lived experience, and others to accomplish two main objectives:

1. **Adapt and implement the Stepping Up model for the juvenile justice system**, including developing a youth-centered framework, creating key metrics to track performance, and designing localized solutions in collaboration with counties.
2. **Align the state’s policies, practices, and resource allocation decisions with what research shows works** to improve community safety and outcomes for youth, with a particular focus on diverting youth with behavioral health needs from secure detention and more effectively serving these youth in the community.

“We’re excited about this collaborative effort as we all pitch in with our expertise, with a primary focus of intervening as early as possible to keep young people out of jails and prisons. The availability of these additional mental health resources is critical to addressing the behaviors and needs of juvenile Kansans with that goal in mind.”

— Jeff Zmuda, *Kansas Secretary of Corrections*

Implementation and Sustainability

This project will culminate in the development of a **Statewide Juvenile Justice and Behavioral Health Action Plan** focused on implementing policy and practice recommendations intended to strengthen cross-system responses to youth involved in the juvenile justice system who have behavioral health needs. Alongside the work associated with the juvenile justice adaptation of the Stepping Up model, a **Statewide Juvenile Justice Stepping Up TA Center** will be launched to support the implementation and sustainability of the Statewide Action Plan.

Origins of the Stepping Up TA Center

The existing Stepping Up TA Center was established in 2021, through a partnership between the CSG Justice Center and KDADS, to address the cycle of incarceration among Kansas adults with serious mental health needs. Since its inception, the TA Center has garnered significant interest and engagement from counties across the state, with 21 counties signing a resolution to commit to Stepping Up and over 95 counties benefiting from TA opportunities such as site visits, webinars and trainings, and peer-to-peer learning. The TA Center has supported counties by enhancing infrastructure, fostering cross-system collaboration, and increasing data capacity at the local level. This has strengthened county-level efforts to keep individuals living with serious mental illnesses out of jail.



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