

**Announcing the Innovation Sites:
Three jurisdictions selected to implement a developmental framework for
emerging adults**

March 31, 2023

Pilot sites in Massachusetts, Nebraska and Washington D.C. will implement the [Columbia Justice Lab's Emerging Adult Justice Project's \(EAJP\) Developmental Framework](#) to create more effective, fair, and developmental responses to 18- to 25-year-olds, who now are over-represented in the criminal legal system, face higher rates of racial and ethnic disparity there, and are rearrested more frequently than any other age group.

The project is funded by the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#). The grantees are the Massachusetts [Committee for Public Counsel Services \(CPCS\)](#), the statewide public defender agency; the [Nebraska Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation \(AOCP\)](#); and in Washington D.C., the nonprofit [Justice Policy Institute \(JPI\)](#). These Innovation Sites were chosen through a competitive process. EAJP will provide technical assistance and research support to the grantees throughout the 2.5-year project period. At each site, grantees will partner closely with emerging adults who have first-hand experience with the justice system and will help guide the implementation process.

The Developmental Framework does not propose specific policies. Instead, it focuses on identifying and supporting the critical developmental needs of emerging adults in programs and policies to help them thrive and to promote public safety. The framework was developed by a diverse group of experts that included researchers, practitioners, policymakers, young people, and advocates.

"Schools consider youth development when designing services and programs, which is why kindergarteners are not taught calculus and college students are not taught to play games to learn shapes and colors. But our criminal legal system doesn't, and typically treats an 18-year-olds in pretty much the same way as a 40- or 50-year-old. By applying a new Developmental Framework, these three Innovation Sites will seek to support healthy development and, consequently, increase public safety. We hope this will be a model for the country," said Lael E.H. Chester, director of the EAJP.

“Through this investment, the Casey Foundation seeks to improve the prospects of emerging adults involved in the criminal justice system,” explained Felipe Franco, a senior fellow at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “Emerging adults are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated experiencing significant obstacles that can stall their aspirations and prospects or derail them entirely. The three distinct demonstration projects bring emerging adults together with public systems and community groups to co-design new developmentally appropriate solutions to help these emergent adults fulfill their potential.”

The sites are diverse geographically and socially. At each one, a different legal system stakeholder will lead the project. Each team enters the project with plans for scaling up the approaches that their teams develop.

In **Massachusetts**, public defenders working in the juvenile court will join their colleagues in representing clients in adult court to create the Emerging Adult Pilot Office, serving youth in Lowell and Lawrence, Mass. They will use the framework to guide their defense of emerging adults and to work with social service and education professionals to advocate for a plan that meets a young person’s individual needs. CPCS will partner with [UTECH](#), a Lowell-based nonprofit that has been supporting the wellness, development, and empowerment of emerging adults involved in the criminal legal system since 1999. After establishing this pilot office, CPCS intends to expand this specialized emerging adult practice into a statewide model over the next three to five years, guiding criminal defense practices for *all* 18- to 25-year-olds in the Commonwealth.

“We are excited and honored to be one of three Innovation Sites selected by the Casey Foundation and Columbia Justice Lab’s EAJP,” stated Anthony Benedetti, Chief Counsel, Committee for Public Counsel Services. “All too often our young people are pulled into the legal system, and then carry the burden that comes with system entanglement and incarceration for the rest of their lives. As public defenders, we know that these youth need better outcomes. By applying the Developmental Framework, and learning from the other sites in Washington, DC and Nebraska, CPCS hopes to create a replicable model that results in both better legal and life outcomes for its emerging adult clients. We look forward to this opportunity!”

The **Nebraska** AOC will use the framework to reshape probation practices to better meet the developmental needs of 18- to 25-year-olds. The AOC will initially pilot the implementation of the framework with emerging adults in two communities - one rural

and one urban - before preparing for statewide implementation. AOCPC plans to focus on four areas: (1) using an individualized probation management model that recognizes each person's unique needs and strengths; (2) developing specialized emerging adult probation officers who receive additional training on such issues as trauma-informed care, diversity, equity and inclusion, and neurological development; (3) centering the voices of emerging adults in the development of practices and policies; and (4) partnering with community members and organizations that can best support emerging adults' learning, growth, and personal development. Community partners in the project include RISE Prison Re-Entry Program, Project Restore Minnesota, Multi-Health Systems, and the National Center for State Courts.

"In 2023, young people's experience transitioning to adulthood is as unique and challenging as ever," explained Eric Maly, Director of Adult Probation Services in Nebraska. "We acknowledge that this convergence of opportunity, uncertainty, identity exploration, and changing norms around adult roles is a necessary consideration for all justice stakeholders. We look forward to this opportunity to collaborate restorative and procedural justice practices and build upon young people's strengths and connection to local resources to enhance community safety."

The **Washington D.C.**-based non-profit JPI will use the framework to roll-out implementation of a strategic plan commissioned by the DC Council when it amended the Youth Rehabilitation Act in 2018, a law that strives to apply more developmentally appropriate responses to emerging adults. The three goals of the plan are to (1) compel the government to work toward trauma-informed, healing-centered, and restorative justice practices and policies; (2) build a community-based continuum of care, including diversion programs, affordable housing, health services, workforce opportunities, educational programming, family involvement services, and restorative justice practices; and (3) create a criminal legal system-based continuum of care, with specialized court programs, probation policies, physical facilities, and reentry support services for emerging adults.

JPI will hire a fellow who is (or was) system involved as an emerging adult, develop an emerging adult advisory board, and regularly visit facilities to solicit input from individuals who are incarcerated. Key partners in this work include the [Thrive Under 25 Coalition](#), which consists of numerous advocacy partners such as the [School Justice Project](#), [Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative](#), and [The Sentencing Project](#); [Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop](#), a nonprofit that supports youth involved in the justice system; and members of the DC Emerging Adult Justice Action Collaborative, a

coalition of policymakers, system-involved individuals, advocates, and other stakeholders created to inform the plan's development.

"In many respects, with the creation of the Young Men Emerging Unit at the D.C. Jail and the passage of the Amended Youth Rehabilitation Act, the District has been at the forefront of emerging adult justice reform efforts," stressed Paul Ashton, Interim Executive Director, Justice Policy Institute. "We are excited to be a part of this important initiative, and work alongside District leaders, and the other sites, to make continued investments in transforming approaches to emerging adult justice."

"We are grateful to all the sites using the developmental framework to find better ways to respond to emerging adults," added Lael Chester. "We are also grateful to the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its increased focus on this age group. Emerging adults are innovators and natural collaborators. They can be tremendous assets to our communities, but too often systems set them up to fail rather than thrive."

The Casey Foundation is dedicating at least half of its investments over the next decade to improving the well-being and prospects of youth and young adults to thrive by age 25. That means not simply surviving with just enough to get by but having the chance to live full lives and realize their true potential. The foundation's [Thrive by 25[®] commitment](#) recognizes that the road to adulthood can be a challenging one for many, but emerging adults in the criminal justice system, young people of color in low-income families, youth in high-poverty communities, young parents and [youth making the transition from foster care to adulthood](#) face significant obstacles that can stall their aspirations and prospects or derail them entirely. These young people are therefore the foundation's focus — and more importantly, partners — for its Thrive by 25 efforts to invest in programs and advance policies to help them change the trajectory of their lives and prevent lifelong problems.