



2025 CSAC Challenge Awards – Executive Summary

Sacramento County Public Defender (SCPD)

Juvenile Pre-Trial Program

Overview: The Sacramento County Public Defender (SCPD) Juvenile Pre-Trial Program (JPTP) assesses children upon entry in the system and links them to individualized, needs-based services.

Challenge: Sacramento County struggled with (1) too many children being incarcerated, (2) children spending extended periods of time on probation, and (3) high recidivism by juvenile justice involved children. From entry to case resolution (often several months or longer), the system emphasized supervision and adjudication rather than addressing the underlying needs of youth and families.

Solution: In 2023, SCPD launched the JPTP, a client centered program rooted in the principles of holistic defense. Within one day of incarceration, a JPTP social worker visits each child, gathers family, social, and psychological history, and conducts a needs-based pretrial screener and a trauma assessment screener. The pre-trial screener identifies individualized areas of need including medical, mental health, education, special education, substance abuse, gender and/or orientation needs, and housing. The trauma assessment screener measures the level and sources of trauma experienced by each child and guides trauma-informed care. The social worker provides findings and a recommendation for treatment and services for the child to the attorney. The attorney and social worker collaborate on a release plan that is presented to the court. The social worker initiates referrals to service providers and, after court, continues services. Upon release, the social worker follows up with providers, the child, and the family to ensure connections are made. When additional community support is needed, the child and family are referred to a community-based organization (CBO) that assigns a community case manager to mentor the child, facilitate prosocial activities, provide transportation (e.g., to court and counseling), and coordinate with the child's attorney and social worker to maintain service linkages.

Innovation: SCPD is uniquely positioned to connect children to services earlier than other justice partners. We are the first point of contact, we build confidential attorney-client relationships, and we can secure child and family buy-in. Courts cannot order services before adjudication, and probation typically connects children to services only after probation is imposed. SCPD can begin services at the outset, so participation is voluntary rather than court mandated. Using social workers from the start broadens the focus from the legal case to the whole child, builds trust early, and allows reentry planning to begin days before the initial hearing. Centering trauma is an additional, innovative shift that improves outcomes.

Results: Although relatively new, JPTP is already showing positive results. Youth incarceration in Sacramento County has been cut in half—from 142 youth in February 2023 to 70 in December 2024. After release, most children connected to services do not return to custody. Addressing root causes reduces delinquent behaviors and recidivism. JPTP front loads services, making judges more comfortable releasing children earlier in the process. If children are placed on probation, they have a solid support network and an established track record of participating and succeeding. Consequently, judges are more comfortable placing youth on informal grants of probation for shorter periods of time, reducing probation workload and county costs. Lower recidivism means safer communities and less need for prosecution and incarceration.

Replicability: The program provides a scalable model other California counties can replicate to address similar juvenile justice challenges. Counties may utilize existing staff or partner with local social work programs and/or community-based organizations. A recent change in the law requires notification to all county public defender offices within two hours of a child's incarceration, providing 2–3 days to prepare a release plan. JPTP screening tools can be shared with interested offices. Using law students and social work interns where possible provides a cost-effective option.

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