POST-SHUMAN VISIONING:

Reimagining Safety

for Young People and Communities

artwork by Josiah Russell

Executive Summary

Background

Shuman Juvenile Detention Center was opened in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania in December 1974 and closed due to unsafe conditions in September 2021. The closure of Shuman occurred after the county had greatly reduced the number of youth held there and amidst a growing national movement to end youth incarceration. This closure presents an opportunity to rethink the treatment of young people in our county and move towards a world without youth incarceration.

We write this with an understanding that youth incarceration is a symptom of systemic racism and other forms of oppression and indicates a collective failure to protect and care for our children. It is imperative that we address the structural roots of violence and oppression. In the interim, we also need to create systems of safety and support for the young people who have, for far too long, been treated as disposable. Much conversation about safety has maintained a myopic focus on keeping communities safe without attention to our collective responsibility for keeping young people safe — safe from the results of the systemic divestment of our educational and social welfare systems, safe from the trauma they witness and experience, and safe from those who do not recognize and honor their inherent worth. While we must work collaboratively to address these broader systemic issues, we recognize there are immediate decisions to be made.

This brief report is designed to help frame the conversation and provide additional perspectives to local systems professionals and policy makers in determining next steps following the closure of Shuman for ensuring safety for young people and the community.

Methods

With the understanding that county leaders will be faced with difficult decisions about what comes after Shuman, local systems professionals, academics, funders, and other community members came together to discuss and collectively vision future options that address the problems that led to Shuman's closure and are the least restrictive and most supportive possible.

As a part of this project, we interviewed young adults who had spent time at Shuman and met with the **Youth Justice Coalition in Los Angeles** to learn from their efforts to close their juvenile detention facility and open a liberatory educational program, the Free L.A. School, in its place.

cover artwork by Morgan Overton

The 18 young people we interviewed reported the following from their time at Shuman:

- They felt unsafe and were subject to violence.
- They struggled to maintain their dignity and get their basic human needs met.
- They experienced staff as unprofessional, inconsistent, and abusive.
- They needed more support and resources for their mental health, specifically around dealing with trauma.
- They wanted more activities and educational opportunities, specifically ones that are relevant to their lives outside of the detention center.

We collaboratively developed the following questions for local decision makers to consider as they determine next steps:

- What would it take to create a path towards ending youth detention in this county?
- How can we reenvision young people's emotional and physical safety and well-being (not punishment) as the purpose of any youth-serving institution or program?
- What systems and structures can the county develop to employ, train, and support qualified staff and hold them accountable?
- What funds can be reallocated to address the systemic barriers that young people face and provide trauma-sensitive and healing-focused services and supports?
- What resources can be used to invest and explore a liberatory schooling model for youth who have been pushed out or engaged in the carceral system?

Summary

We learned from young people who were incarcerated at Shuman and from students, teachers, and staff at the Free L.A. School that we need to reimagine safety, support, and inclusion for young people and communities in Allegheny County by focusing on mutual accountability and healing rather than punishment. Thus, our overarching goal should be to create a path to end youth incarceration by investing in supports that will render youth detention obsolete.

To do this, we must create safe and nurturing spaces for young people who have been determined to pose an imminent risk to their community so as to avoid the current practice of sending them out of the county or to the county jail.

We also advocate for ensuring that all youth-serving programs and institutions have excellent staff and careful oversight, and that funds and efforts are reallocated to mental health supports and to the development of a liberatory school for young people who have been incarcerated, pushed out, or excluded from other spaces, which can provide an important means to care for and reintegrate them, and thus prevent future violence.

We want to create a community for our young people where they are honored and recognized for their unique strengths, developed as leaders and engaged community members, and supported and cared for in ways that promote their growth and thriving.

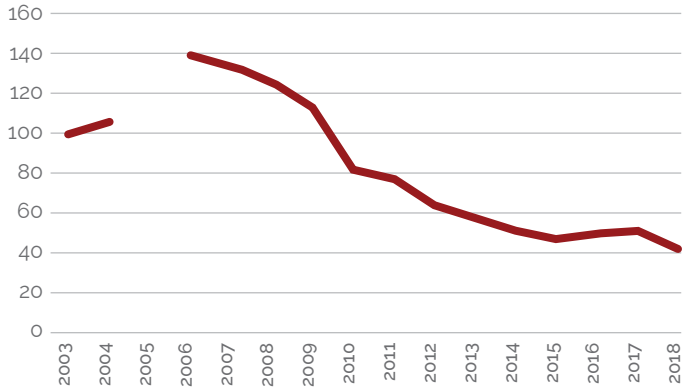
Background

Shuman Juvenile Detention Center was opened in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania in December 1974. According to the most recent (2018) **Allegheny County Juvenile Probation annual report**, "Juveniles are placed in secure detention at Shuman Center when it is necessary to protect the community and ensure their appearance in Court" (p. 18)[1]. Operating under provisional licensure since December 2015, the facility was closed in September 2021 after having its license revoked by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services based on "gross incompetence, negligence and misconduct" creating unsafe conditions.[2]

With a licensed capacity of 130, Shuman held only 20 young people at the time the decision to close it was made,[3] due to ongoing efforts to decrease the numbers of youth detained as well as specific efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic to limit youth detention. According to Allegheny County Juvenile Probation reports, the average daily census at Shuman was 100 in 2003 and 42 in 2018 (the most recent year for which an annual report is posted). Fluctuating over time, the average daily census at Shuman in 2018 had decreased 70% from its peak in 2006 at 139, which was over its licensed capacity. According to Allegheny County Manager William McKain, young people used to be detained at Shuman for behaviors as minor as truancy violations, but that was no longer happening at the time of its closure.[2] Allegheny County's successful efforts to decrease the numbers of young people detained at Shuman must be recognized, as well as the challenges of maintaining adequate staffing and conditions during the pandemic.

The closure of Shuman occurred during a growing national movement to end youth incarceration. Advocates (including young people currently or formerly incarcerated) seek to close youth detention and placement facilities through efforts to ensure public safety and youth support with non-carceral alternatives. At the same time, there are important concerns that the closing of Shuman means young people from Allegheny County are being placed in detention outside of the county and incarcerated in the Allegheny County Jail. Shuman's closure also presents an opportunity to rethink how we keep young people and communities safe as we move towards a world without youth incarceration. To date, much conversation about safety has maintained a myopic focus on keeping communities safe without attention to our collective responsibility for keeping young people safe - safe from the results of the systemic divestment of our educational and social welfare systems, safe from the trauma they witness and experience, and safe from those who do not recognize and honor their inherent worth. As we consider next steps, we must center the safety of young people and communities, recognizing that these goals are connected rather than in opposition to each other.

Average Daily Census at Shuman



[1] Shuman Detention Center was a pre-adjudication facility. Thus, youth were placed there after arrest but before their adjudicatory hearings. This is distinct from secure placement to which young people may be sent by a judge following the adjudication process.
[2] Davidson, Tom. (2021, August 24). "**Pa. report describes 'gross incompetence' at Shuman Juvenile Detention Center**." *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*.
[3] Davidson, Tom. (2021, August 23). "**Shuman Juvenile Detention Center to close after state revokes license**." *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*.

Community Process

With the understanding that county leaders will be faced with difficult decisions about what comes after Shuman, local systems professionals, academics, funders, and other community members came together to discuss and collectively vision future options that address the problems that led to Shuman's closure and are the least restrictive and most supportive possible.

Discussions included people from a variety of disparate perspectives and roles - from people working within the juvenile justice system to those seeking to abolish it, meaning that we do not all see things in the same ways and have differing responsibilities and constituents to whom we are accountable. However, we came together with the shared goals of keeping young people and communities safe and providing support that allows youth to develop into knowledgeable, thriving, and engaged adults.

From November 2021 through February 2022, we held a series of meetings, many of which were facilitated through the **Black Girls Equity Alliance** (BGEA) Juvenile Justice Workgroup. We decided to focus on learning from two constituencies to inform our local visioning: 1) people in other locations who have developed emancipatory alternatives to juvenile detention facilities, and 2) young people who were incarcerated in Shuman.

For the first learning goal, we were connected with folks from the **Free L.A. School**, which was opened by the **Youth Justice Coalition** (YJC) in Los Angeles after their successful organizing to close their local juvenile detention facility. The YJC is a youth-centered organization whose primary mission is to work against systems of mass incarceration and deportation. It is an abolitionist organization that invests in youth support to make youth detention centers and youth incarceration obsolete.

Following initial planning meetings, we invited teachers, staff, and students from the Free L.A. School to the January 2022 meeting of the BGEA Juvenile Justice Workgroup, which was attended by over 60 people. They shared their school's history, philosophy, and current practices through their descriptions of their roles, interactions, and experiences there. Feedback from meeting attendees indicated that exposure to the Free L.A. School model and approach was enlightening, as many had not learned of these alternative ways of providing safety, support, and learning for young people who have been excluded from mainstream schools and spaces.

We also interviewed youth and young adults who had spent time at Shuman, all but one of whom had been incarcerated at Shuman multiple times, with one reporting being there approximately 20 times, and with lengths of stay ranging from a day or two to 6 months. In total, we talked with 18 young people, ranging in age from 14 to 27. Of these, 15 were Black/African American, 2 White, and 1 Biracial. Thirteen were self-identified boys or young men and 5 self-identified girls or young women. Most had been identified as having disabilities for which they needed special education supports, and one was a young person who spent time at Shuman because of involvement with the child welfare system rather than because she had been charged with a crime. Interviewees were diverse in other ways as well, including people who are parents, are neurodivergent/autistic, or identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

In addition to interested community members, participants include people from: Gwen's Girls, Black Girls Equity Alliance, 1Hood Media, the Youth Advocacy Clinic at Duquesne University, Allegheny Intermediate Unit, Allegheny County Department of Human Services, Allegheny County Juvenile Probation Office, Just Discipline Project, UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Schools of Medicine, Social Work, and Education, FISA Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, and the Pittsburgh Foundation.

What the young people had to say

In what follows, we describe what the young people shared about their experiences at Shuman. This includes both themes prevalent across the interviews as well as individual, relevant reflections.

Safety and Basic Human Needs

Those interviewed consistently described Shuman as a place where they struggled to meet their basic human needs and access dignity. Some mentioned inadequate and moldy food and a refusal to honor dietary restrictions. One who had been pregnant while in Shuman reported not being offered food she could eat or appropriate medical care. Others described unsanitary conditions and an inability to sleep due to uncomfortable beds and the practice of keeping the lights on overnight. Still others explained that being restricted with handcuffs and shackles was inappropriate given their age and exacerbated the trauma they had already endured in their lives. Many reflected on the lack of adequate mental health supports.

They also described Shuman as an environment that was violent and unsafe, one even describing it as a place that "grooms kids for crime not healing." The lack of safety they reported was due in large part to fighting, drugs, and gang activity. The tension among the incarcerated youth was made worse by the practice at Shuman to group young people by neighborhood. Overall, the lack of structured activities led students to busy themselves with "drama" and conflict.

Staff

The topic most brought up was the staff, and most of the feedback was negative. While a few young people described staff as people who they could connect with because they had similar lived experiences, many described the staff as unprofessional, inconsistent, predatory, and abusive. We do not want to overgeneralize about staff and thus note that the young people interviewed mentioned some staff who were helpful and supportive.

Nevertheless, they consistently described staff having different rules and expectations for different kids, playing favorites, deciding who to help and protect, and deciding who to target. A few of those interviewed explained that they felt safe because they knew the staff "had my back" or because they knew they were one of the favorites. Others described being physically abused by staff, having their head slammed into the ground, and being jumped by staff on their first day.

Additionally, the staff was described as "unprofessional," "had no boundaries," "played into the drama," and encouraged the kids to fight with each other. One interviewee explained how the staff would put one youth in charge of a unit and ask them to "handle" any problems. Two others detailed how the staff would share personal information about the young people held at Shuman with other youth held there. Still others explained how many of the drugs that channeled through Shuman were brought in by staff.

Multiple young women interviewed explained that the staff were sexually abusive and used the power embedded in their role to manipulate them sexually. For example, one explained how a staff member would exchange snacks for sexual favors. Another described how "several male staff would pursue female juveniles in a romantic manner while detained and then follow them around the community upon release."

There were complaints about a lack of accountability as well. A few of those interviewed did not know where to file complaints about staff behavior or were actively denied the opportunity to air grievances. Still others shared experiences of being retaliated against for making reports; one young woman described how staff withheld bras and tampons from her after she filed a complaint.

Collectively, young people requested that future staff be selected for their ability to talk to and support young people who have experienced trauma. In addition, they want the staff trained in de-escalation tactics as well as monitored for drugs

Mental Health Resources and Support

The other most common theme across the interviews was the ubiquitous request for additional counseling, therapy, and mental health resources. As one interviewee explained, "everyone I know at Shuman has experienced significant trauma," but they are not being cared for, they are only being punished. More specifically and most commonly, those interviewed asked for trauma-informed therapy. They also expressed a need for specific treatment for victims of sexual abuse and tools for emotional regulation, anger management, empathy training, and conflict resolution. A few reflected that not only did Shuman not help them process or alleviate their trauma, it in fact exacerbated or compounded it. We recognize that therapy is not the goal of a detention facility, in large part because any stays should be brief. However, from interviews with young people, it is clear that there is a great need and demand for resources to support them in processing and healing from trauma.

Activities, School, and Engagement

There were consistent requests for structured activities both to keep the young people occupied but also to prepare them for reentering society better equipped to function. They asked for additional life skills training in topics including financial literacy and searching and interviewing for jobs. They also asked for training in how to navigate the court system and learn their legal rights. Others simply asked for extracurricular activities that would help them deal with the boredom and distract them from the drama - activities like book clubs, chess clubs, and time spent outside. Finally, some expressed interest in a mentorship program where they would have the opportunity to learn from people who had spent time incarcerated when young but had grown and created a life for themselves that they are proud of.

There were mixed responses to the schooling component of Shuman. Some of those interviewed had positive things to say about their experiences with the schooling program at Shuman, describing it as the best part of their day. Others, however, described it as simply subpar, busy work. There was a general, frustrated consensus with the lack of communication between school at Shuman and their home school. Multiple interviewees explained that none of the work they did at Shuman "counted" or that there was not good record keeping of the educational progress they made while at Shuman. In addition, a few expressed interest in a curriculum that was more connected to their needs, including legal education, life skills, and coping skills.

There was extensive discussion about the support the interviewees lacked and desired for their reentry. First, many were disappointed by the lack of connection they were able to maintain to their family and community while in Shuman. They also discussed the need for support in their efforts to return to school, family, and community. A few reported that it would have been helpful had the staff at Shuman investigated their home to ensure that they were returning to a safe space.

Summary

It is clear from these interviews that young people who spent time at Shuman found it to be, for the most part, an inhospitable place, to say the very least, that neither kept them safe nor helped them to develop, learn, or grow. These findings are difficult to digest. Our children deserve care and support regardless of what they have done.

The Path Toward Ending Youth Detention

What we heard from young people is consistent with national research on juvenile detention. While this may be typical, that does not mean it is acceptable. We are confident that those reading this report share our conviction that something must be done to change the landscape for young people here in Allegheny County. Indeed, closing Shuman was one step in that process.

Our ultimate goal is to live in a community that does not take part in the process of locking young people up at all. In order to get there, we need to invest in programs and interventions that heal and support children who have experienced trauma and are engaging in behaviors to which the system responds with punishment and incarceration, especially for minoritized youth. We are inspired by the Youth Justice Coalition's work in opening a school within the building that had previously been a juvenile detention center to provide resources and support to young people that can prevent them from system contact and incarceration.

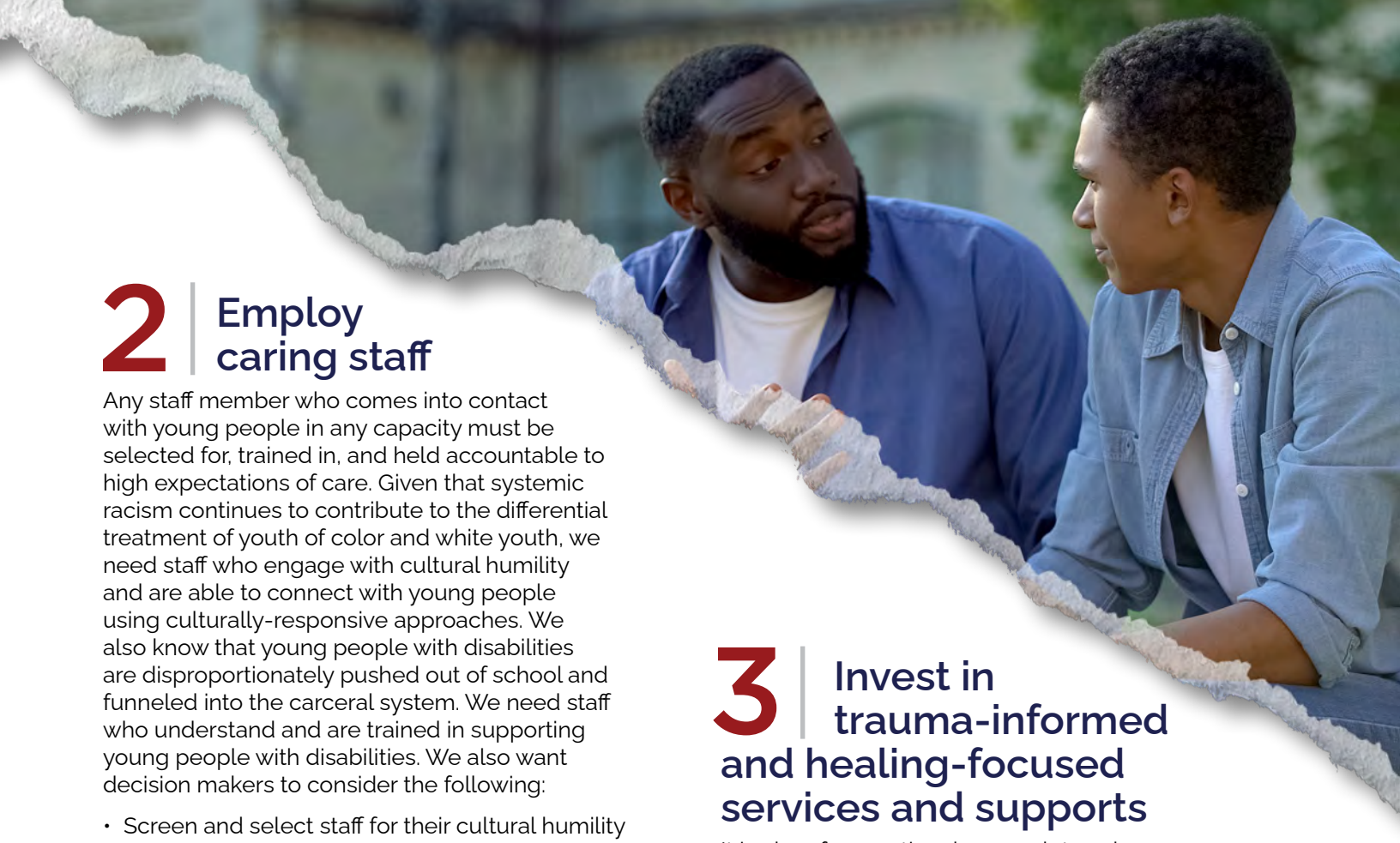
While we understand that some people perceive a need for a detention facility for young people determined to pose an immediate and significant risk to the community, we are deeply concerned that creating such a facility could lead to the long-term continuation of youth incarceration practices. At the same time, we understand the need to ensure that these children do not end up in the county jail or sent to facilities out of the county. Thus, we need to invest, as a county, in exploring alternative models to ensure the safety of our young people and communities while we simultaneously redirect funds previously spent on Shuman into the services and resources needed to prevent violence and support, rather than punish, youth who come into contact with the carceral system.

With a recognition of how youth and community safety are connected, in what follows, we outline essential practices for ensuring young people's and communities' safety and working towards an end to youth detention. First, we discuss the importance of reenvisioning the purpose of any youth-serving programs. Next, we examine the essential task of employing and holding accountable high quality staff in any facility serving youth. Then, we discuss in greater depth the need for trauma-informed and healing-focused services and liberatory educational programs for those young people who have engaged with the system.

1 Reenvision safety and support (not punishment) as the purpose of youth-serving institutions and programs

All young people deserve to feel and be safe. The juvenile justice system was founded on the belief that children are still developing and can be rehabilitated. While it is meant to hold them accountable for their actions, it is supposed to do so in a way that provides an opportunity for learning and growth. No matter what they are believed to have done, children must be protected and cared for rather than punished and traumatized. The juvenile justice system was not intended to be punitive, though it has frequently operated that way. Additionally, throughout its history, the juvenile justice system has locked up young people (particularly girls) "for their own good" or to protect them, only to be further violated. Importantly, children brought to a detention facility have not had a hearing before a judge, thus punishing them is not only inappropriate but preemptive.

We need to figure out, as a community, how to care for those young people who pose an imminent risk to ensure they are not sent to the county jail or transferred far from their homes. We must do this in a way that meets their basic needs and maintains their dignity. At the very least, they deserve healthy food that addresses any dietary restrictions and needs, appropriate medical care, immediate mental health support, room to move, time outside, and the ability to maintain connections with their loved ones. But safety is more than this. Young people also must feel safe emotionally and psychologically. As we describe below, part of this includes ensuring high quality staff and trauma-sensitive services and resources.



2 Employ caring staff

Any staff member who comes into contact with young people in any capacity must be selected for, trained in, and held accountable to high expectations of care. Given that systemic racism continues to contribute to the differential treatment of youth of color and white youth, we need staff who engage with cultural humility and are able to connect with young people using culturally-responsive approaches. We also know that young people with disabilities are disproportionately pushed out of school and funneled into the carceral system. We need staff who understand and are trained in supporting young people with disabilities. We also want decision makers to consider the following:

- Screen and select staff for their cultural humility and ability to care for, connect with, and keep young people safe.
- Create better mechanisms to prepare those who are invested in this work, especially those who have shared life experience with young people, to develop the skills and credentials necessary to serve in these roles.
- Train all staff in healing centered, culturally-responsive, anti-oppressive, freedom pedagogies, as well as trauma-sensitive practices and de-escalation tactics.
- Develop better systems of supervision and accountability, especially around drugs, instigating conflict, and sexual assault, as well as a clear grievance process for young people who are victimized by staff.
- Provide salaries that are competitive and include benefits in order to recruit and retain high quality staff members to serve in these roles.

3 Invest in trauma-informed and healing-focused services and supports

It is clear from national research trends, our professional knowledge, and testimonies from young people who were incarcerated at Shuman that there is great need for mental health support. There is extensive evidence that young people who come into contact with the system and/or are incarcerated have experienced high levels of trauma and abuse for which our prior youth-serving systems have not provided adequate healing, support, and care. This trauma and abuse are often important predecessors to the behaviors that brought them to the attention of the carceral system. We recommend reallocating funds previously spent on maintaining Shuman, in addition to other necessary funds, towards the following:

- Mental health support for young people for their own well-being and as a preventative strategy for individual and community safety. Ensure free and accessible therapy in schools, community centers, and local organizations to help young people process, heal, and recover.
- A public awareness campaign to inform young people and adults across the county about available mental health resources and social supports for the young people with whom they engage.
- Trainings and ongoing support for any adult interfacing with young people in or outside of a carceral facility in trauma-sensitive practices.

4 Invest in a liberatory schooling model for youth who experience pushout

All young people deserve an education that prepares them to live safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives. Young people who have experienced trauma, systemic racism, and other forms of oppression deserve and would particularly benefit from liberatory educational programming. One framing of a liberatory education is one that is rooted in community and collective self determination, an understanding of one's own history, and one that cultivates young people skills and critical consciousness to engage in and change an oppressive system. This approach to education serves as a form of prevention, healing, and preparation for a safe and meaningful life. We believe that at least some of the money previously spent to maintain a juvenile detention facility should instead be reallocated to create a liberatory schooling model specifically for those students who have engaged with the system.

The first step to developing a liberatory educational program would be developing a team to explore and develop this model, a team that centers the participation, voices, and experiences of people who have had direct experience with the system. We have already learned from Free LA and the relevant literature that liberatory educational programs must be built on the trauma-informed practices outlined above and modeled in historical practices in freedom education. In addition, the Free L.A. School keeps young people physically and emotionally safe through practices that are grounded in the ideology of transformative justice (TJ). The underlying assumption of this approach is that building relationships and community accountability will prevent harm so that there will be less need to create systems in response to harm. When conflict or a disagreement does occur at Free L.A., the staff and young people take as much time as necessary to talk through the conflict both individually and together. Throughout this process, the staff support both people involved, with the goal of understanding and healing, never punishment. In addition, the school relies on staff members called peacebuilders to maintain safety, who are leaders from the community trained in conflict resolution, transformative justice, and trauma-informed practices. There are no security guards, no police, and no guns or other weapons allowed in the building. Free L.A. is driven by the knowledge that for students to feel safe, they need to know that they will not be excluded or expelled, even if they make a mistake, but rather cared for and guided through reflection, accountability, and healing.

In addition, liberatory educational programs provide youth with the following:

- Opportunities to learn about and sustain their own culture, identity, and history of not only oppression but also resistance and joy
- Opportunities to engage in a political education that allows them to reflect on their own experiences and connect them with understandings of systemic oppression and inequities
- Opportunities to learn about their legal rights and the legal system through programs such as Street Law or the Marshall Brennan Program
- Opportunities for young people to engage in artistic and creative activities that allow them to express, explore, and discuss their feelings and life experiences in meaningful ways
- Opportunities to connect with and learn from mentors who have had similar life experiences
- Opportunities to explore what they want their future to look like and learn more about the specific paths that can take them there

Often, young people who have had involvement with carceral systems do not have the opportunity to continue their schooling and especially to earn a high school diploma. It is important that a liberatory school offer the option of earning a Pennsylvania Department of Education diploma.

“Many of the staff members at Free L.A. are former students at the school and/or have personal experience with incarceration. The Free L.A. School was founded by young people and adults who came together with a desire to support young people in a way that wasn't tied to the carceral state. When we think about how school police have transformed in a negative way how school operates and how we think about safety, or when we think about accountability, it's become very punitive because it's tied to law enforcement and these systems of oppression.

We wanted to make a school that did not replicate any of those things. Through those visions, Free L.A. came to be,

where what safety looks like is having peacebuilders.

And a peacebuilder is someone that's from the neighborhood, or someone that's system impacted, or someone that knows the community and is able to support young people through a mentor or peacebuilder lens instead of having security and a weapon or a badge.”

— Staff Member at Free L.A. School

“Transformative justice is a grounding ideology of the space. If we build relationships and community accountability, then that prevents harm rather than only ever needing to respond to it.

But if there is a conflict or a disagreement, there's circles — usually multiple circles — held after, where there's not the victim-perpetrator binary. It's 'harm happened.' And there's conversations after to make sure that both people are supported and there's a way to get to the root, structurally and interpersonally, of what happened, on both people's ends. And then

being able to heal rather than punishment

or fear of punishment being the only thing that's a deterrent.”

— Teacher at Free L.A.

"There are three different types of justice: we have **street justice**, which is the toughest person wins; we have **court justice**, where we don't really have a say, whoever oversees that courthouse, whatever they think justice is; and then there's **transformative justice**, which is what Free L.A. uses.

We have a social emotional counselor on site Monday to Friday. So people have these TJ circles. An example is, when I was a student there, I had a conflict with a girl. I was just having a rough day. It wasn't too bad, but it was decent enough for us just to be separated to calm down for a little bit. [The counselor] talked to me and got my side of the story, then she talked to the other young lady and got her side of the story. Then she asked us if we were okay to meet in person or if we needed to wait until tomorrow or next week. But we couldn't attend class until we had the TJ circle.

Coming out of the circle, I realized that I was already having a bad day, it wasn't her fault. I apologized to her. I let her know that I did not mean to harm her. The one thing that I know about TJ, it's not only that you go in to listen, you also have to comprehend. As she's telling me her side of the story, I have to repeat back what I understood from her side of the story, the same way she has to repeat back what she heard from my side of the story. I didn't like your tone and you didn't like my tone so that's what it was, and I apologized, 'cause I started it.

We weren't best friends but we did acknowledge each other and kept a cool distance ever since then. It's a timeless process. A circle could last an hour, two, three. Sometimes people are not ready for TJ, are not ready for conversations.

What really broke me down was [the counselor] said,

'it's okay, I have all day.'

And that broke me down, for somebody to tell me that they have all day for me to throw this fit. She had all day for me. And I just broke down crying, 'cause I realized that

nobody had ever told me that."

— Free L.A. staff member who is a former student.

FREE L.A.'s core academic program includes English/Language Arts with a focus on competency in literacy, Pre-Algebra and Algebra, and Life and Earth Science. But **the heart of our program is training and direct, experiential learning in social justice organizing and movement building** with standards-based instruction in systems of oppression and strategies for dismantling racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism/homophobia, adultism, and religious fundamentalism; Constitutional Law including street law, court monitoring and court (defense) support; participatory action research; civics (including government structures, public policy development, electoral politics and skills and community organizing); history (including movement building); economics (including units on slavery/human trafficking, globalization, food justice and immigration/migration); and life skills (**including transformative justice and warrior circles to reduce violence, harm and conflict and heal from trauma**).

— Free L.A. website

In conclusion,

we learned from young people who were incarcerated at Shuman and from students, teachers, and staff at the Free L.A. School that we need to reimagine safety and support for young people and communities in Allegheny County by focusing on mutual accountability and healing rather than punishment. Thus, our overarching goal is to create a path to end youth incarceration by investing in supports that will render youth detention obsolete. As we do this, we must create safe and supportive spaces for young people who have been determined to pose an imminent risk to their community so as to avoid the current practice of sending them out of the county or to the county jail.

> **"What makes the school unique is our circles we have on Fridays called Street University, which teaches us about law. It teaches you the right laws to know about and stuff we can use in the streets to be safe."**
>
> *— Current Free L.A. Student*

We advocate for ensuring that all youth-serving programs and institutions have excellent staff and careful oversight. We also recommend devoting funds and effort to mental health supports and to the development of a school like the Free L.A. School for young people who have been incarcerated, pushed out or excluded from other spaces, which can provide an important means to care for and reintegrate them, and thus prevent future violence.

Throughout the process of determining what happens now that Shuman has been shuttered, we ask for transparency and public input in all decision-making processes. The collaborative process of developing this document revealed the magnitude of diverse constituents who are invested and willing to contribute their time and thought to making these difficult decisions. We hope there will be opportunities for input and participation from this community as we continue to determine what is best for the children in this county.

Key Terms

Safety

The concept of safety is at the center of this report, in which we propose "reimagining safety" for young people and communities. Our carceral systems have traditionally sought to ensure safety by identifying and containing "risky" people and behaviors. This approach perpetuates violence and harm, resulting in exclusion and marginalization. We propose that "reimagining safety" necessitates a broader view, one that looks not just at the present moment but also at the past and the future, recognizing how youth and community safety are connected rather than oppositional.

The Denver Task Force to Reimagine Policing and Public Safety developed the following definition: "Public safety ensures that all members of the community decide how to organize a social environment that provides the freedom to live and thrive with the protection and support of social, physical, mental and economic well-being. … Public safety prevents, reduces, and heals harm."[4] We hope that our community can engage in a similar process of collectively defining safety and collaboratively working to ensure the safety of young people and communities.

Liberatory Education

A liberatory education is one that is rooted in community and collective self determination, an understanding of one's own history, and one that cultivates young people's skills and critical consciousness to engage in and change an oppressive system. This approach to education serves as a form of prevention, healing, and preparation for a safe and meaningful life.

Abolition

In the context of carceral systems, abolition refers to a world without policing, jails, and prisons where people have what they need to survive and thrive through transformative justice and robust community development. An abolitionist approach is rooted in developing comprehensive community support that would render incarceration obsolete rather than simply eliminating police and prisons. In other words, it is about envisioning and building a supportive, just society where the focus is on the collective well-being of individuals and communities.

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[4] Denver Task Force to Reimagine Policing and Public Safety. (2021, May). ***Recommendations for transforming public safety in Denver.***

Additional Information and Resources

1Hood Media
Black Girls Equity Alliance
Cage Free NYC
Cambridge Heart
Care Not Control
Critical Resistance
Free L.A. School
Interrupting Criminalization
Journey for Justice
No Kids in Prison
Street Law
Vera Institute for Justice's Initiative to End Girls' Incarceration
Youth Sentencing and Reentry Project
Zero Youth Detention

Statement about collective process:
This document is a living document that was created through community conversations. This document was not created through consensus but rather through ongoing collaboration.

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Artists

Morgan Overton is a visual artist and Pittsburgh native. Her work aims to amplify the history, humanity, and future of Black culture. Morgan's work is grounded in the Nina Simone quote, "It's an artist's duty to reflect the times." She believes that art is a powerful platform to disrupt the status quo and honor the resilience of her People. Morgan's work has been featured across Greater Pittsburgh — notably at the Carnegie Museum of Art, August Wilson Center, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, University of Pittsburgh, and Carnegie Mellon University. In addition, various social justice exhibits across the United States and St. Paul de Vence, France. Follow her work at **www.mointhestudio.com**.

Josiah Russell is a visual artist from Wilkinsburg, PA. They recently graduated high school and will be attending Clarion University in the Spring of 2023.

With gratitude to the young people who shared their perspectives and experiences at Shuman, as well as to those who interviewed them, including Tammy Hughes, Jay Moser, Tamia Taylor, Cortney VanHook, and Chelsea Williams.

With special thanks to the Free L.A. School teachers, staff, and students who shared their wisdom and experiences, including Margaret Goldman, Sir Bailey, Lupita Carballo, Gloria Gonzalez, Jared "Jaybo" O'Brien, and Anthony Robles.

Developed with support from FISA Foundation