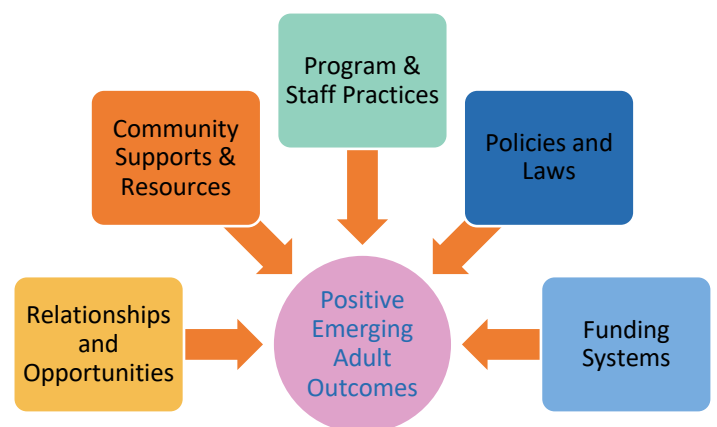


Promoting Healthy Development for Emerging Adults in the Justice System: A Framework for Practice and System Transformation

July 26, 2022

The burgeoning field of Emerging Adult Justice, focused on young people between the ages of 18 and 25 who are involved in the criminal legal system, is garnering increasing attention around the country. The reasons to shift our criminal system's approach to emerging adults include (a) data showing that emerging adults do particularly poorly in the adult criminal legal system (e.g., have the highest recidivism rates and most pronounced racial disparities of any age group), and (b) recognition that the adult system does not provide the kinds of developmentally appropriate services, programs, or opportunities that support the healthy transition to adulthood. **As jurisdictions seek to improve outcomes by adopting more developmentally appropriate responses, the need for a Developmental Framework to guide them has become apparent.** Existing developmental models focus primarily on youth below age 18, and there has been concern raised by practitioners, researchers, and emerging adults with justice experience that models focused earlier on adolescence inadequately support the distinct developmental stage of emerging adulthood and fail to take into account the unique legal and life impacts of the adult criminal legal system on emerging adult development.

Inspired by the work of our [Learning Community](#), the Justice Lab's Emerging Adult Justice Project (EAJP) embarked on a multi-year, research- and site-based project to (1) develop a new Framework, and (2) test and refine the Framework in select sites with the goal of transforming the justice system's response to emerging adults. With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation,¹ the EAJP created and led a steering committee of experts (emerging adults with experience in the system, practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and advocates) who met to discuss existing developmental models, research, and participants' personal and professional experiences.

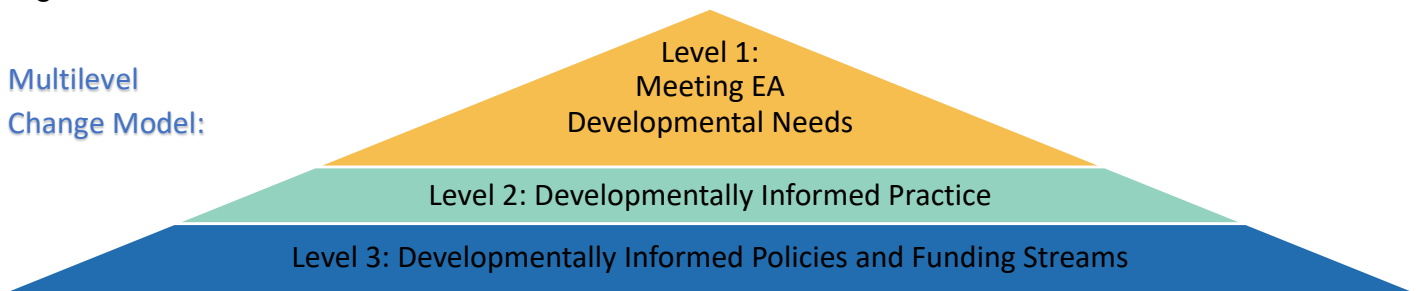


¹ The EAJP is grateful to the Casey Foundation for their funding and support but acknowledges that any findings and conclusions presented are from the Columbia Justice Lab alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

Together, the group adopted and developed a framework designed *specifically* for emerging adults involved in all stages of the criminal legal system (from prosecutorial diversion to re-entry).

Transforming how criminal legal systems respond to emerging adults is multifaceted and requires thinking differently about what they need, how systems work with them, and the bigger context in which systems operate. **Change is needed at multiple levels:**

1. **Individual:** Systems must ensure emerging adults have the critical experiences and relationships they need to grow into healthy adults.
2. **Practice:** Staff and programs must adopt practices that promote critical developmental experiences, including connecting young people to community partners who can support healthy, normative development.
3. **Policy:** Systems must adopt policies and laws that support individual healthy development and effective practice, get rid of those that do not, and re-orient funding to community-based supports that can sustain young people for the long-term.



LEVEL 1 (Individual): Transforming Our Understanding of Emerging Adult Needs

In order to achieve well-being, emerging adults need to feel safety and belonging and have a sense of their own identity, competency, and ability to contribute to their families and communities.

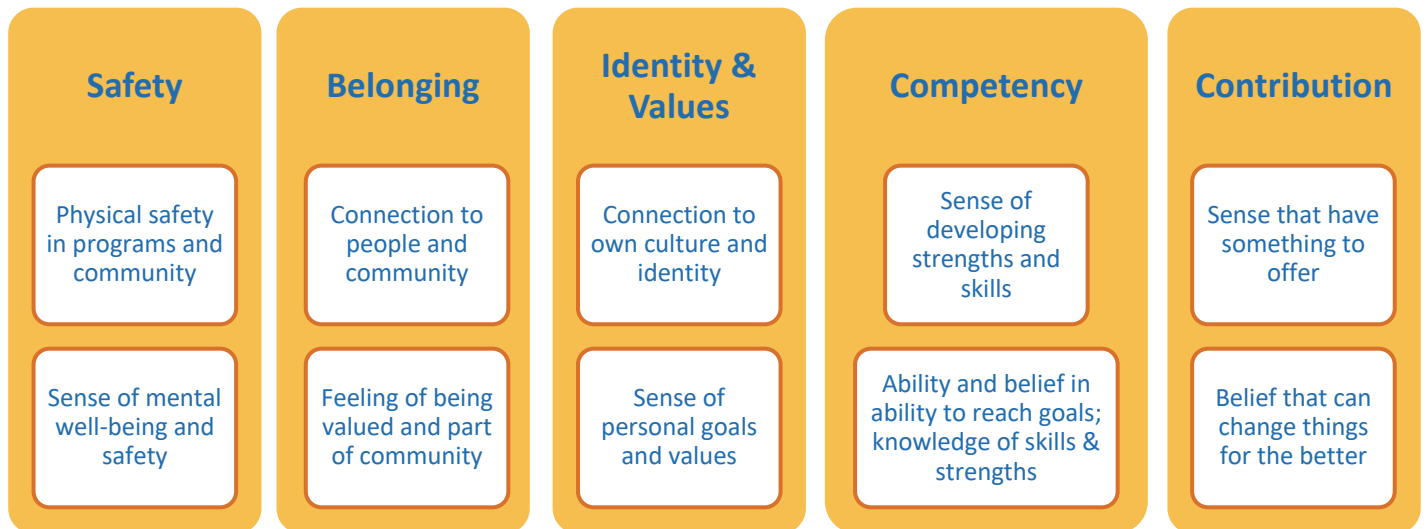


Chart: Aspects of Individual Well-Being Emerging Adults Need to Thrive

To experience these core aspects of well-being, emerging adults need access to relationships and experiences, sometimes with support and in programs, that give them the chance to heal, learn, lead, and contribute, including chances to try and fail, and chances to grow into leaders and contributors in their own families and communities.

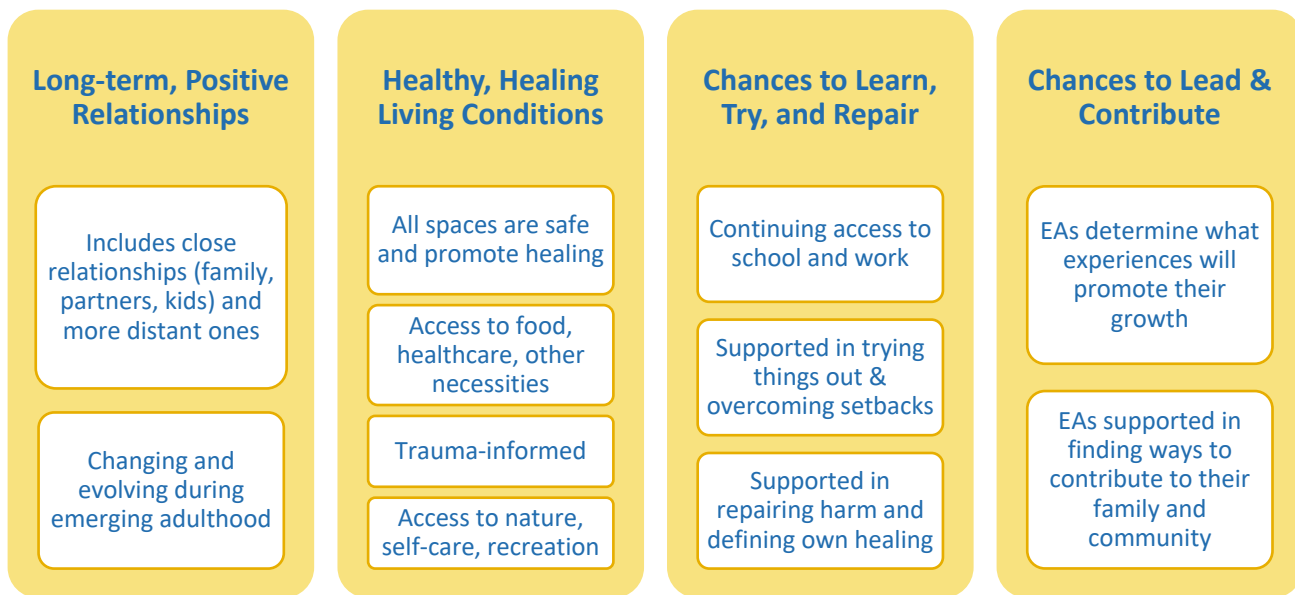


Chart: Core Experiences and Relationships Emerging Adults Need

LEVEL 2 (Practice): Building Practices and Partnerships to Ensure Emerging Adults Have Critical Developmental Experiences

Because healthy, normative development happens through young people’s engagement with families, peers, and community programs, not state systems, criminal legal systems often function as barriers to youth accessing the critical experiences and relationships of Level 1. Legal systems can help build bridges for youth to connect to these healthy sources of development, including funding and partnering with community-based programs, but they cannot replace them. For young people in the criminal legal system, who may have lacked supports or experienced trauma at earlier life stages, or who have caused harm, it is especially critical that system practices do not cause further trauma and support healing and repair, and that they experience staff and program practices that are designed to help them thrive. While there is no single list of practices that promote these experiences for every emerging adult, every practice and program should demonstrate the principle of CARES:

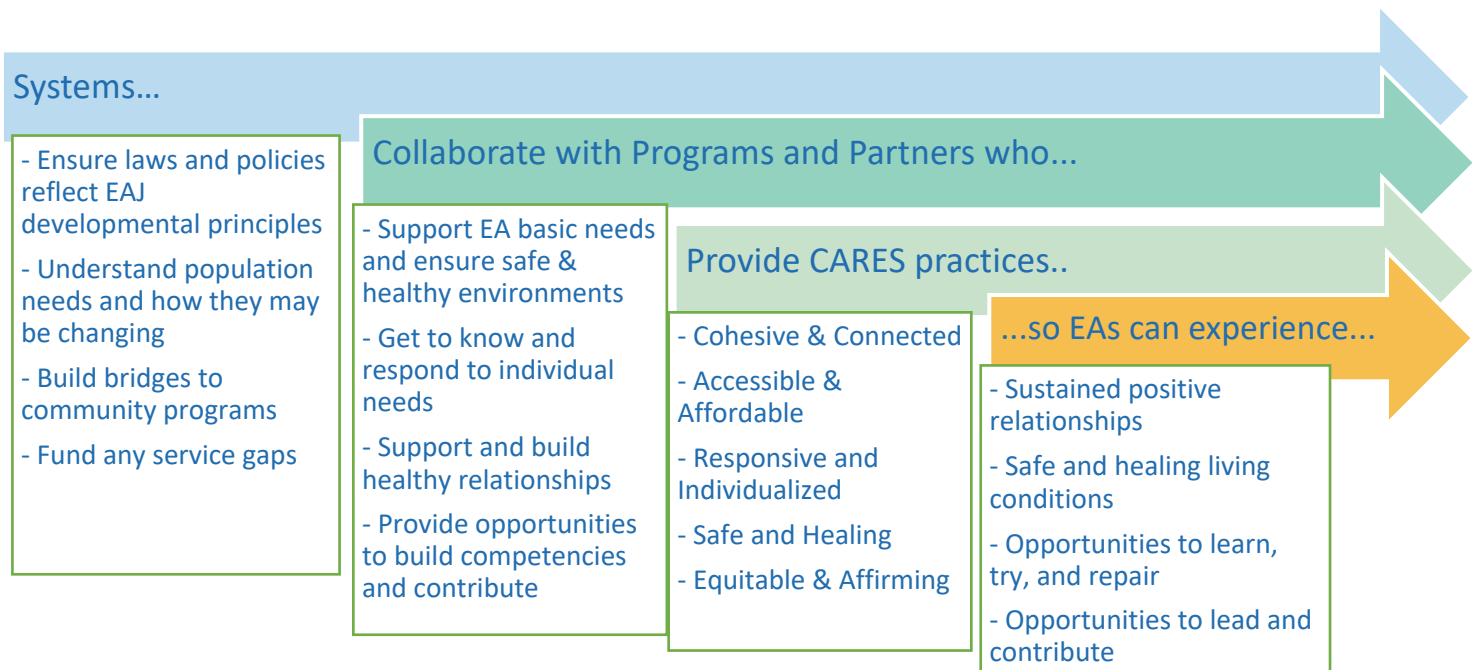
- **Cohesive and connected** with primary sources of healthy development (family, school, community).
- **Accessible and affordable** to all young people, regardless of financial means, access to transportation, other family obligations, disability, or other potential barriers to access.
- **Responsive and individualized**, addressing both the universal developmental needs identified at Level 1 and young people’s individual strengths and histories.
- **Equitable and affirming** of young people’s racial/ethnic, cultural, gender and other shared identities, and free from experiences of discrimination or oppression.
- **Safe and Healing**, ensuring that young people experience safety, can meet basic needs, and have opportunities to improve their own health and well-being.



Chart: Examples of CARES Practices that support Level 2, Practice Transformation

LEVEL 3 (Policy): Building Systems that Support Practices to Promote Emerging Adult Development

In order to succeed, programs and staff need support from the larger structure of policies and funding in which they are embedded. Systems must adopt policies and laws that support individual healthy development and effective practice, get rid of those that do not, and re-orient funding to community-based supports that can sustain young people for the long-term.



As with program practices, there is not a single “recipe” for how to shift policies or funding in ways that will best support healthy development for emerging adults. But in most jurisdictions, at least four broad categories of change can be beneficial:

1. Eliminating policies that directly undermine healthy development (e.g., solitary confinement, limits on family visitation, banning individuals from living in public housing);
2. Reforming or expanding policies that better support youth, support/train staff, and engage community partners to do the work (e.g., reducing caseloads, creating multi-system partnerships, and creating or expanding expungement);

3. Implementing policies and laws that transform how the criminal legal system responds or how it works with other systems (e.g., changing jurisdictional boundaries, major sentencing or bail reforms, and policies implementing presumptive diversion for certain offenses);
4. Adopting policies that broadly improve conditions for people and communities in which emerging adults live (e.g., food security programs and expanding healthcare access).

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE EAJ FRAMEWORK

