



POLICY RESEARCH, INC.

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SPOTLIGHT ON THE LEGACY OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH REFORM IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY, WI

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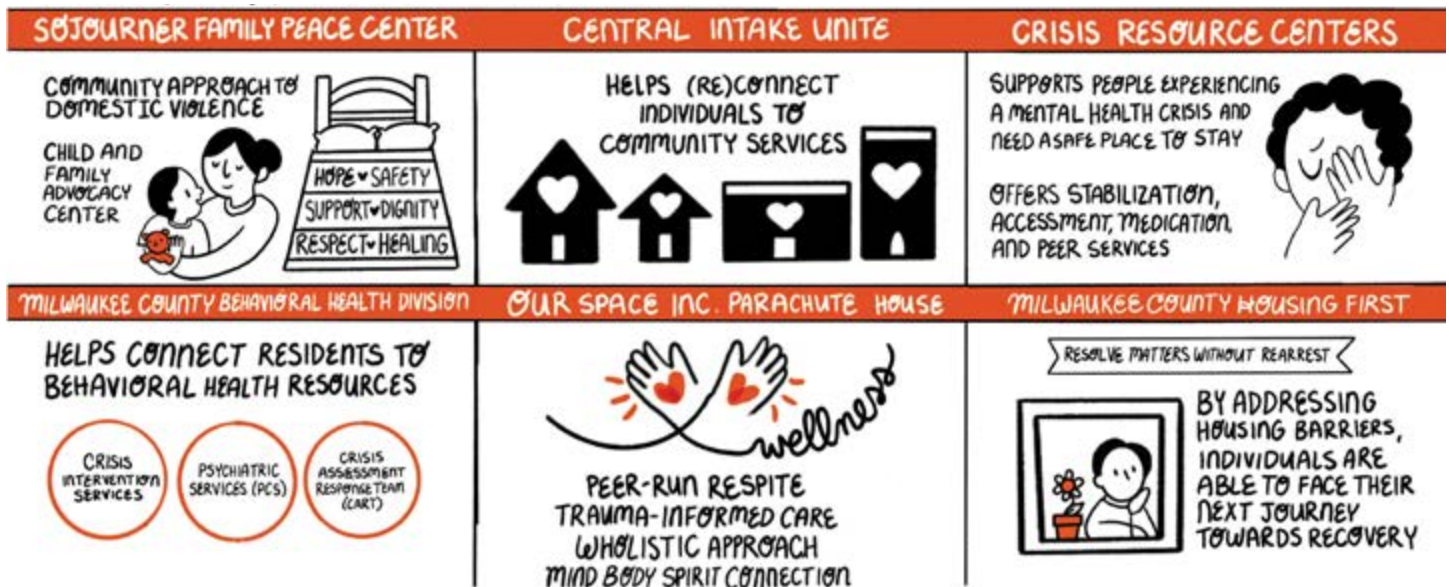
Since 2015, the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) has grown to an over \$400 million national initiative funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The initiative, which has expanded to over 100 cities and counties, supports collaboration among local leaders and communities to reduce over-incarceration in local criminal legal systems by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails. Policy Research, Inc., (PRI) partners with the MacArthur Foundation to help SJC communities reduce the number of individuals with mental illness, substance use, and other complex needs who are involved, or at risk of involvement with, their local criminal legal systems. The following is a spotlight on the behavioral health-focused work of one SJC site: **Milwaukee County, Wisconsin**.

Since they engaged with the SJC in 2015, Milwaukee County has advanced and developed multiple strategies specifically for individuals with behavioral health needs. Led by their [Community Justice Council](#), Milwaukee recognized the importance of diversion and intervention points within the community and across the criminal legal system. They took a comprehensive approach to redesign and better serve people with behavioral health and related complex needs.

Policy Research has provided technical assistance to Milwaukee through the SJC, including facilitating three [Sequential Intercept Model](#) Mapping Workshops (2015, 2018, and 2025) that brought together local cross-system representatives to identify gaps and resources and build consensus over time. As in most jurisdictions, there were many changes to personnel, programs, and specific priorities over the 10 years of the

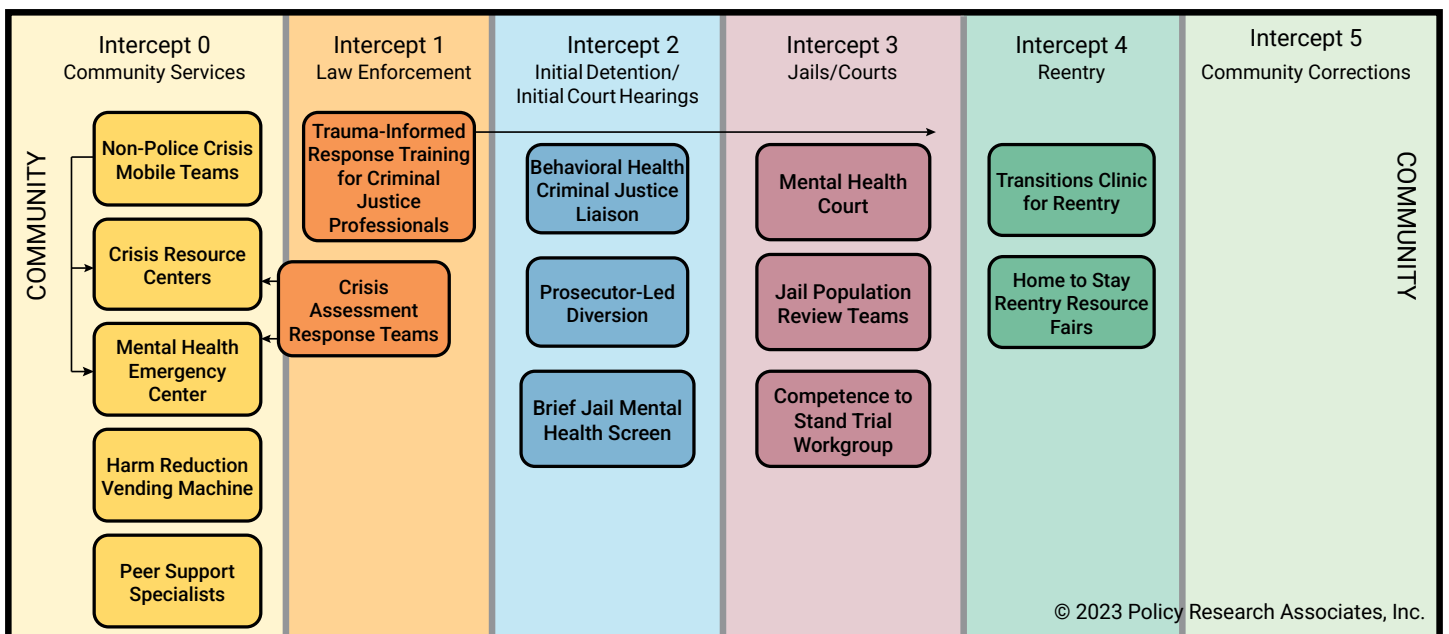
SJC, and meeting regularly to update Milwaukee’s Sequential Intercept Model Map and increase or re-establish collaboration was vital to their continued momentum.

In 2020, Milwaukee County also hosted PRI’s annual SJC Behavioral Health Meeting, serving as a model of behavioral health jail diversion and providing more than 100 representatives across SJC sites with the opportunity to attend virtual “site visits” with local programs.



MILWAUKEE VIRTUAL SITE VISIT ROUNDTABLE GRAPHIC RECORDING NOTES, PART OF THE VIRTUAL SJC BEHAVIORAL HEALTH MEETING, HELD VIRTUALLY IN JUNE 2020

Accomplishments by Intercept



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MILWAUKEE’S ACCOMPLISHMENTS BY SIM INTERCEPT

Intercept 0: Community Services

- Non-police Crisis Mobile Teams provide 24/7 response from counselors, therapists, psychologists, and nurses to adults, youth, and families.
- Crisis Resource Centers have grown as a community-based deflection alternative to emergency rooms or inpatient hospitalization for mental health or substance use needs.
- Milwaukee opened a [Mental Health Emergency Center](#) in 2022 as a joint venture between County Behavioral Health Services and four of the area's health systems. The 24/7 center offers crisis mental health assessment, stabilization, treatment, and transition care management for all ages.
- A new [Harm Reduction Vending Machine](#) initiative provides training, education, and supplies to reduce overdose deaths.
- Additional Peer Support Specialists, individuals with lived experience with the justice and/or behavioral health systems, were trained to help people manage their mental health conditions. Incorporating peer support across intercepts was an early recommendation following a 2016 site visit and the 2018 SIM workshop.

Intercept 1: Law Enforcement

- Milwaukee expanded its number of Crisis Assessment Response Teams (CART) for countywide coverage of law enforcement officers paired with behavioral health clinicians to stabilize mental health crises, connect people with community resources, and reduce arrests and involuntary hospitalizations. Part of the expansion was attributed to an SJC-funded CART team demonstrating the need for an additional team for true countywide coverage.
- Following [trauma-informed response training](#) and strategic planning from Policy Research from 2017-2018, Milwaukee developed capacity for ongoing training for professionals working in the criminal legal system. Trauma-informed crisis intervention training has now been delivered to over 590 system stakeholders, including across the Milwaukee Police Department and at their training academy, with 80% of area judges, and to over 380 staff from the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

Intercept 2: Initial Detention/Initial Court Hearings

- A new Behavioral Health Criminal Justice Liaison position was created to work with jail healthcare and the County District Attorney and State Public Defender's offices to complete assessments at booking and identify and connect people with mental health needs to community resources. Milwaukee also created mental health internships under the supervision of the Behavioral Health Criminal Justice Liaison, providing a new pathway to expand the future workforce.

- Prosecutor-led diversion and deferred prosecution efforts have been expanded (for more, see [Prosecutor-Led Diversion Strategies in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin](#)).
- Milwaukee implemented PRA's [Brief Jail Mental Health Screen](#) to better identify individuals at jail booking in need of further mental health assessment.

Intercept 3: Jails/Courts

- The Mental Health Court expanded past a pilot stage to greatly increase capacity. This was a key recommendation stemming from Milwaukee's 2018 SIM Mapping Workshop, and PRI provided consultation throughout the planning and expansion process.
- Jail Population Review Teams hold interdisciplinary staffing meetings to decide if Early Interventions, Mental Health Treatment Court, or implementing specific mental health-related requirements to release conditions will help individuals who find themselves in the criminal legal system.
- Taking advantage of co-sponsored technical assistance through PRI and SAMHSA's GAINS Center in 2024-25, Milwaukee collaborated with Wisconsin to enhance its statewide focus on reducing wait times for individuals found incompetent to stand trial. Milwaukee joined a 2024 multistate policy academy, created a new Forensic Discharge Coordinator position, and formed a Competency to Stand Trial Workgroup with case review meetings. Better serving individuals who may be found incompetent to stand trial was also a key focus of Milwaukee's 2025 SIM Mapping Workshop.

Intercept 4: Reentry

- Increased reentry service coordination was a specific priority identified during Milwaukee's 2018 SIM Mapping Workshop. A Transitions Clinic now serves individuals returning from incarceration. It provides health services to community members, preventing cyclical system involvement through peer support and helping them navigate health and social challenges.
- Home to Stay Reentry Resource Fairs provide returning individuals with resources, employment opportunities, and health and social support. A website was also developed to connect returning citizens to employment resources.

Sustaining the Legacy of Behavioral Health Reform

Milwaukee's momentum in building out a better community-wide response to mental health and related needs will continue following the formal wind-down of the SJC. There have already been collaborative efforts to sustain and grow the work, including through financial support. Recognizing the long-lasting benefits of behavioral health systems change under the SJC, Wisconsin and Milwaukee County have absorbed multiple positions previously funded by grants, including the Behavioral Health Criminal Justice Liaison and paid mental health internships, to grow the local workforce. Some of the work started under the SJC has also inspired federal investments, including using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to support the Mental Health Emergency Center and the Mental Health Treatment Court, and a psychiatry fellowship through the Medical College of Wisconsin to support the court.

“My best advice for other jurisdictions: Take time to develop local relationships and understand your community, but also invest the time in engaging with other communities. I think it was always extremely validating to learn that the work we have done in Milwaukee aligned with the best practices in other participating SJC sites.” —Justin Kuehl, PsyD, Chief Clinical Officer/Treatment Director, Milwaukee County DHHS, Behavioral Health Services

Perhaps even more significant than the individual programs developed during the SJC are the collaborative relationships and connections formed over the last 10 years. During that time, the County's Behavioral Health Services experienced dramatic changes, including a transition from operating a public psychiatric hospital to community-based care. The reallocation of resources was intentional and aligned with the values of local criminal legal system partners. As of this publication, vested partners remain engaged in numerous workgroups and community outreach efforts. These collaborations remain grounded in a shared vision to ensure high-quality mental health services to all.



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