JUVENILE JUSTICE NEEDS ASSESSMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
“What can the Juvenile Court do to improve its ability to help our youth?”

Study Methods and Participants
Cook County Justice for Children and its Juvenile Justice Strategy Team, commissioned a comprehensive needs assessment conducted by researchers at the Mansfield Institute for Social Justice and Transformation at Roosevelt University and the Adler School Institute on Public Safety and Social Justice. The needs assessment utilized a combination of surveys, focus groups, and in depth interviews to gather the insights of myriad juvenile justice stakeholders. Ranging from current, or former, court-involved youth and community members to court personnel, service providers, and individuals in key leadership positions within Cook County’s Juvenile Justice System, over 200 individuals participated in the study, and provided their thoughts and perspectives as to the role the Court can play in helping our court-involved youth.

Why the study was conducted
According a report prepared for the government by the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, Almost 9 out of 10 kids who spend time in Illinois youth prisons end up going back to prison within three years of their release, with Cook County have the highest recidivism of 10 counties in the state. The current study was conducted to increase understanding of the perceived strengths and weaknesses in the juvenile justice system. As we learn more about the effects of detention, or youth court involvement in overall neurological and social development, it is important to determine how we can move forward in a way that reflects our better understanding of rehabilitation of court involved youth, who have generally experienced complex trauma, and have many unmet basic needs. We wish to identify the opportunities juvenile justice stakeholders have to coordinate efforts in a way that promotes positive transformation for youth, families, and communities.

Best Practices
Stakeholder Interviews
Throughout the study, stakeholders consistently pointed to the benefits of diversion and alternative to detention programming for youth as a key component and first step in helping youth successfully exit the Juvenile Court system. The key stakeholder interviews highlighted the importance of programs located within the communities they were serving that also provided wraparound services and included the whole family. There were several examples of successful community based programs including Evening Reporting Centers, Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, Urban Life Skills, Alternatives and overall, restorative justice programming.

Youth and Family Focus Groups
In discussions with youth and families several themes emerged regarding strengths of these alternatives/community programs. One neighborhood felt court involvement gave them access to support, guidance and mentorship with staff at the community organizations where they were referred, as a condition of their probation. Typically one person guided them, gave them hope, trust, a different perspective on how to move forward and reintegrate into the community after their court involvement ended. Overall, these
relationships cultivated through the community organizations made a difference in their lives. Little Village is the only jurisdiction that offers blanket referrals to ongoing mentoring programs as a condition of probation.

Survey Respondents
Similarly, the survey results emphasized the importance of connecting youth to the community services in order to secure their safety, their overall success and reduce their risk of recidivating. This included an emphasis on the importance of accompaniment throughout their court process and beyond, building relationships and guidance for reconnecting with family, community and school.

Challenges
1. Lack of knowledge about community based programs which results in programs being underutilized and contributes to a reduced level of confidence in community programs.
2. There is a need for increased constructive and regular communication, coordination, accountability, and relationship building on the part of the Juvenile Court, Juvenile Detention, and Probation, and community service providers in order to effectively remove barriers and improve success of our young people.
3. Parents need court personnel, such as Judges or Public Defenders, to take the time to help them understand the juvenile court process in general and court proceedings in particular.
4. Many at risk youth who need services were unable to receive them without entering the juvenile justice system.
5. There is need for increased funding and/or more fully funded programs for diverting youth from secure detention. In addition, available programs need to be brought to scale so that more youth can be served for longer periods of time.
6. There is a lack of understanding of DMC and effective solutions to create change in this area
7. A lack of coordination and cooperation exists between departments within the court and between the court and CPS; both put youth at risk of not succeeding
8. There is a hesitancy by some stakeholders in referring youth to community due to a lack of formal evaluation of program effectiveness and tracking of key data points and indicators of success.

Recommendations and Potential for Change
1. The overarching recommendation is to create a common goal of keeping youth in community.
2. Increase knowledge of and confidence in community alternatives by assuring alternatives are known to judges, and that their effectiveness is understood and evaluated.
   a. Additionally, standards of care, contact, and practice must be understood by community alternatives to detention
   b. Implement community visits for Judges and other court personnel to ensure a greater understanding of the work going on in the community
3. Provide education for parents and caregivers on the court process and how to help their children successfully meet their court responsibility and prepare to successfully exit the system.
4. Provide education to juvenile justice stakeholders on child development, brain science and trauma.
5. Help to create a shift in the mindset among court personnel and Juvenile Justice stakeholders that a preventative approach is a humane approach and that providing information and support to youth in need who cross their path is in accord with true justice.
6. Justice Reinvestment is necessary and can shift intervention from governmental systems to community service providers that work with youth and their caretakers.
7. Create an awareness campaign to increase understanding of DMC and ways to end it.
8. Identify and staff key bridge-builders within the Juvenile Justice system including individuals that can move between systems to assure that positive youth development is at the center of decision-making.
9. Incentivize prevention of court involvement by assuring that programs that work with court-involved youth are given funds for preventative and transformational programming.
10. Increase level of information sharing and data transparency across all juvenile justice stakeholders.