

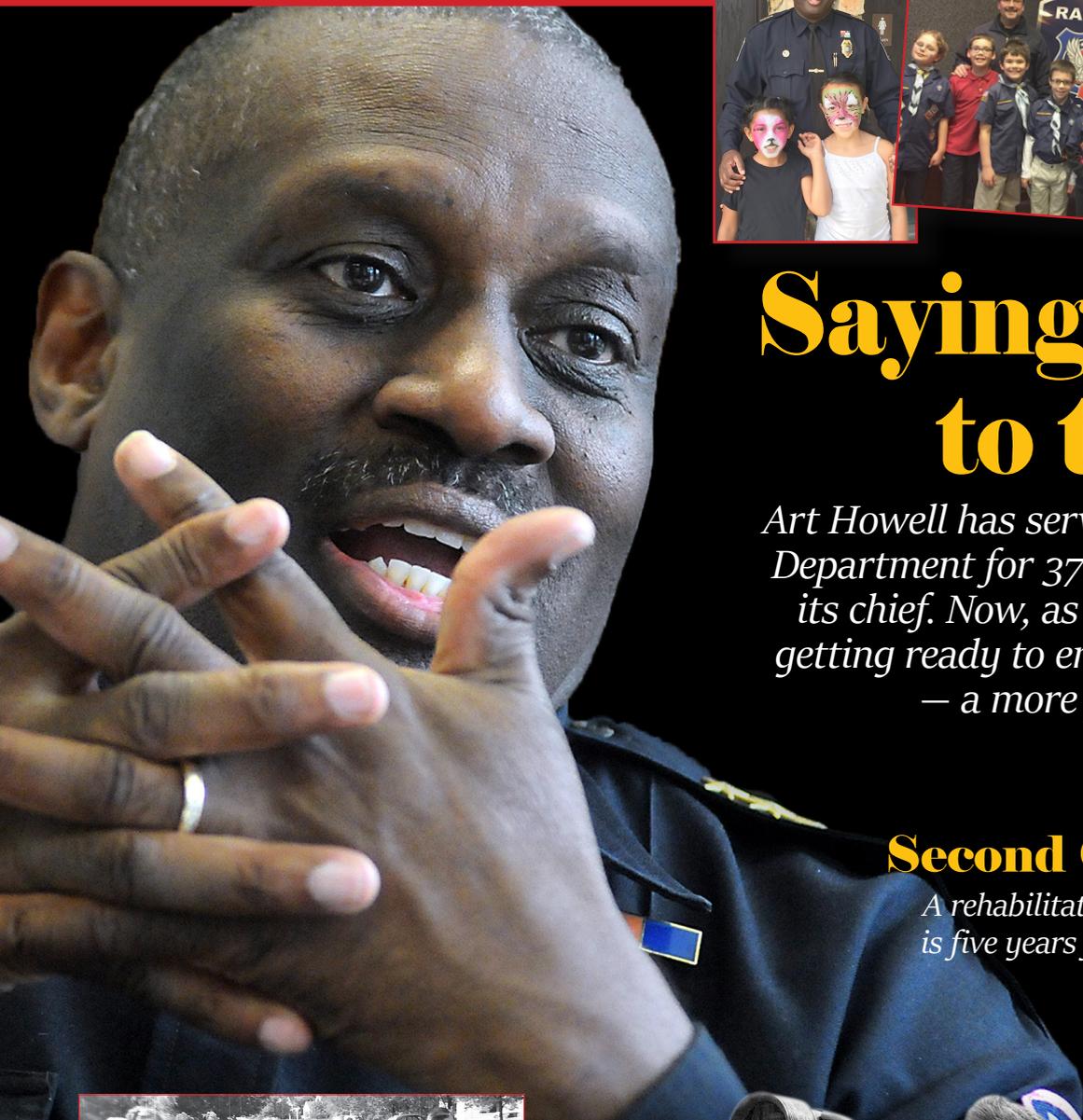
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SPRING 2021

# Harbinger

of RACINE COUNTY

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## Saying goodbye to the Chief

*Art Howell has served with the Racine Police Department for 376 years, including nine as its chief. Now, as he nears retirement, he is getting ready to enjoy the fruits of his labor — a more peaceful, less violent city.*

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## Second Chance

*A rehabilitated Carl Fields is five years free — kind of*

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## Growing up Vanderhoef

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- Nick Ramsey
- Jason Meekma
- Trevor Jung
- Darlene Rivest
- Gail Navratil
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## Behind the Lens

*Racine native Peter Deming is killing it in L.A. as one of Hollywood's most sought-after cinematographers*

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# CARL FIELDS:

## Walking softly and carrying a big message



*Five years ago come March 17, Carl Joseph Fields walked out of the Winnebago Correctional Center after spending 16 years in nearly a dozen state prisons for what he calls a “knucklehead” decision he made when he was 20 years old. He made the most of his time in lockup just as now, at 41, he is making the most of his time on the outside. Since his early release, he has turned his firsthand perspective on Wisconsin’s troubled corrections system into a message of hope for others like him, immersing himself as an agent for change with a number of organizations out to do the right thing.*

Photos by Gregory Shaver

Carl Fields spent the morning of his 21st birthday — Sept. 11, 2000 — before Judge Wayne Marik in Racine’s Felony Court, pleading guilty to three counts of reckless endangerment for firing shots at Racine police during a six-hour standoff four months earlier. Five weeks later, on Oct. 20, Marik pronounced sentence: 18 years in state prison and 15 years of extended supervision.

Arguably, it was one of the worst days of Carl’s young life. But that day also marked the beginning of an incredible journey through Wisconsin’s criminal justice system and out the other side as a changed man — two years earlier than anyone had planned. Anyone, that is, except Carl.

“I didn’t think it would take that long,” Carl says. “I once read that, in all matters, start with the end in mind. Prepare a plan all the way to the end, then work your way back. That’s what I did. My time frame said I’d be home by the time I was 32. Make it happen. I ended up being 36, but 36 was still sooner than 38.”

From day one, Carl leaned on fellow inmates and prison officials for advice on how to make the most of his time behind bars. He enrolled in virtually every program the system had to offer. He quickly

**I dotted all the I’s and crossed all the T’s and I still couldn’t make something work for myself. That was heartbreaking.**

became recognized for his leadership skills, his positive attitude, and his ability to master the curriculum. His journey took courage, determination, patience, and more than his fair share of tongue-biting.

Carl served time in nearly one-third of the state’s 37 correctional facilities, with each transfer giving him more freedom to move about and, better still, fresh stacks of library materials to consume.

“You want to go to a facility that either allows you to have more freedom or to be closer to your family,” Carl says. “I always pushed to be in one of those predicaments. I never went backwards in the steps I took.”

His first stop after spending seven months in the Racine County jail was to the Dodge Correctional Institution, a receiving center that ultimately dispatched Carl to the Waupun Correctional Institution.

“Waupun was really like Day One of prison,” he says. “Whatever example you set there will be your life for the next few years or decades, depending on your sentence.

“Waupun looked like Castle World. You walk inside and it looks like Oz and it’s scary. I thought, ‘This is bad. This place chews people up and spits them out. I can see it.’”

Carl had one question: “How do I *not* do this?”

A soft-spoken, self-described introvert, Carl has always been an inquisitive soul. In fact, much of his frustration in grade school came when the answers to his questions weren’t readily found in any textbook. So even as a kid he would go out and find his own answers.

“I asked my cellmate, ‘Where do I start? How do I make this work?’ He told me, ‘Get these programs out of the way first. Learn how the system works. Start learning about the law. And the best way to do that is to go to the library and talk to some people.’”

So he did.

“I talked to guys who will never come home who, to their credit, still have it in their spirit to help a young kid figure this out,” Carl says. “I wouldn’t be who I am and where I am if it weren’t for the guys who are serving 150 years and still read and stay current and learn how systems work and where the failures are



and how I would need to traverse this big of a chasm versus one this big — you know, the one they tell you about and the one that is actual.

“If I didn’t have that kind of insight from people a lot older than me and a lot smarter than me at the time, I wouldn’t have been able to find my way. I feel like I owe them.”

...

**F**ast forward 16 years to March of 2016, when Carl began paying back as a free man. Well, not entirely free. There was the matter of 15 years of extended supervision, a third of which has already been completed.

His homecoming was special. He reunited with his daughter Cheyenne, who was 18 months old when Carl started doing time, and Isaiah, his then-unborn son.

“I was gone for most of their lives,” Carl says. “That’s my biggest regret. I like who I am now, I appreciate who I am, and the understanding about life and self that I have, it simply costs too much. The people who pay



reentering into the community but also the practical steps that people need to take. He is able to speak the language of people coming from different backgrounds. His ability to match their language draws them in.”

While Carl is thrilled to be bringing his message of hope to those at the Hospitality Center during the week, he is equally passionate about his weekend work with WISDOM, a statewide grassroots organization comprised of more than 150 smaller

entities, including the Racine Interfaith Coalition, which share a common voice on social justice issues ranging from immigrant rights and economic justice to public transportation and health care availability.

Carl first heard of WISDOM while still in prison and was immediately sold on what the organization stood for. At the time, WISDOM had launched the 11x15 campaign, which sought to reduce to 11,000 Wisconsin’s prison population by the end of 2015.

“I saw how they put the DOC (Department

**Carl is who he is because of what he has been through. He has taken the worst thing that has ever happened to him and has turned it into his greatest strength.**

**— David Liners, director of WISDOM**

of Corrections) on its heels in a broad, connecting way,” Carl says. “When a hundred people in prison get the same piece of mail that is a missive, that does something. I saw how that changed the conversation of those living there and how that affected the administration’s willingness to change some rules, and I said, ‘Oh, yeah. You are the people I want to be with when I get home.’”

The 11x15 campaign morphed some years later into what is now called Restore Our Community (ROC), and EXPO (EX-incarcerated People Organizing) was born out of that.

“Now people with that particular voice, that

particular perspective have their own platform on which to stand,” Carl says, “and push their message in concert with those who held the doors open and stood in the gap for us.

“I give much respect to those people because, while I was on the shelf somewhere — and before that, being a dumb ass, a knucklehead — they were doing work before I even knew what that was, what that meant. They held the door open knowing or hoping that one day someone like me, people like us, would come. Hey, you’ve got to love that. So I feel like that’s my job. I need to hold the door open for my people, because they’re coming, right?”

WISDOM leadership has noticed not only the energy Carl has invested in their causes but his extraordinary skills and abilities, as well.

“Carl is ‘Exhibit A,’” says WISDOM’s state director David Liners. “He is an example that people grow, people change. No one is a finished product at age 17. I think Carl is what Carl was always supposed to be; it simply needed time to come out.

“The other thing he brings, as my wife from Boston would say, ‘He’s wicked smart.’ He has an ability to analyze things and retain things and put things together that is kind of amazing. He also has a passion for other people. It’s more than just ‘I want to give back.’ His whole identity is about trying to make things better for other folks, especially those who have gotten a bad deal.

“Carl is who he is because of what he has been through. He has taken the worst thing that has ever happened to him and has turned it into his greatest strength.”

One of WISDOM and EXPO’s current and most ambitious initiatives is their fight against “Crimeless Revocation” — the practice of re-incarcerating people on parole, probation, or extended supervision for violating (or suspected of violating, Carl says) often-minor rules of post-imprisonment supervision.

“Sometimes the violations are unproven,” Carl says. “The threshold for which they make these decisions is very low. I always compare it to when you’re going to court, going to trial, for them to convict you and to remove your freedom from you, to displace you, they have to prove beyond reasonable doubt what it is

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Carl recently received the annual Community Outstanding Service Award by the Racine Interfaith Coalition (RIC) for his dedication to the Racine community through his work at the Hospitality Center, as well as his involvement with local, state, and national organizations that share a common voice on social justice issues.

“Carl came to us five years ago as an intern,” says RIC co-president Linda Boyle, “and we immediately put him to work building relationships with those can help us in our fight for social justice. He has far surpassed what we ever imagined could get done. He has worked across the state and in Washington (DC), and he has built himself a community of people not only in his circumstance but others, as well. We were there first to support him; now he’s here to support us. His drive, his story, his intelligence, his skills, and his kind and caring nature combine to make him a perfect fit for us.”

The award was given at RIC’s annual Love & Justice Breakfast on Feb. 13.

*RIC is a non-profit organization made up of 27 congregations united in the effort to create a fairer, more equitable, and more just community by advocating for changes in local and state laws and ordinances through education, advocacy and community organizing.*



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they said you did. In this instance, ‘reasonable doubt’ is like all the way up here. The standard when you are on parole or probation, the preponderance of evidence is way down here. If you’re already connected to the system, the level with which to put you back in jail is like a puddle versus an ocean. That’s a problem because three-fourths of the people DOC oversees are in this low-threshold category, so any time prison numbers go low, all they have to do is tap that, and fill it back up.”

Like many others who are fighting to end, or at least reduce, crimeless revocation, Carl knows there are other ways. And Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers agrees (see the text of his Feb. 16 tweet on page 39). Evers’ two-year, \$91 billion state budget proposal says as much.

“Community alternatives can do a better job,” Carl says, “and at a fraction of the cost. When we start having those cost savings,



we can close this prison, or that facility. Unfortunately, the pushback is usually, ‘But what about all these jobs we’ll lose?’ That’s scary. And when they have a powerful mechanism to backstop such a philosophy, damn, we’re in trouble. That is so far into the weeds and such layered thinking that the average person who is trying to get a job and pay the light bill by Friday doesn’t have time to think about it or focus on it.”

Like Carl, most people returning home struggle to fit in, so sending them back to prison on a technicality — like missing a meeting with a parole or probation officer — is not money well spent.

“The truth is, most of the time, the very issues that sent them to prison to begin with were never fully addressed, if at all. Most prisons are overcrowded and there is very little programming because programming costs money and money tends to be prioritized in dead space — buildings and facilities — not in help for the person there. This is a problem. That does not foster public safety in the way it is explained it does. A lot of people come back with little or no programming, with no ability to exercise that social behavior that they stress so much. They come back, they’re willing to work, they can train themselves in what their needs are, but they don’t operate well around people.”

Carl and his peers have been more than moderately successful in getting these messages to those in charge, but some have been reluctant to act.

“They listen to, you know, ‘the experts,’” Carl says, “but I’m like, ‘I was there. I experienced the system from concept to completion. I can tell you what it is and what it isn’t, and where the gaps are. And I can tell you from a first-person perspective and from a systems perspective.’ And they’re like, ‘Nah.’

“And that’s where the courage comes in: the courage to listen and the courage to change it. But for some, it’s not advantageous to hear it.”

Why not?

“Because ‘smart on crime’ and promoting the community in the way we’re talking about doesn’t garner votes. It doesn’t bring people out to the polls. And it lessens their ability to continue to do things the way they’ve always done them, unfortunately.”

But Carl and company aren’t about to be muzzled.

**I decided while I was away that I would live my life out loud so it can all come forth and be powerful and progressive for me.**

“I decided while I was away that I would live my life out loud,” he says, “so it can all come forth and be powerful and progressive for me. I’ve been gone for too long and have developed too many skills to not be using those skills. But the only way to be able to use them and explain them is if I also can talk about this. There was no way for me to be silent and still use some of the gifts I have.

“The investment in criminal justice is not for the betterment of criminal justice and its facilities; it is for the betterment of the community.”

Carl’s recent promotion to the Hospitality Center’s director of community engagement role will allow him to do just that.

“Now I can focus directly on that kind of civic engagement that is required to be the cornerstone for what we do at the Hospitality Center,” Carl says. “Communication is important, but communication for a young black man is vital. Being in the community and part of a system that teases out your ability to speak up — and there can be consequences that go along with speaking up — how does one strategically do that? How does one leverage that ability to speak up for themselves to raise up people and bring about the critical mass that tips the scales for all levels? I rate on the Myers-Briggs scale as a champion introvert, an idealistic fool. It takes all sorts of voices converging on one point to produce the community result that we want.

“Many of my peers have something to say but they don’t how to say it. At one point in my life, I had to learn how to make some statements and make some noise on their behalf. It emboldened me and empowered me to make noise in the new way, the new mechanisms: advocacy and policy.”

While statistics bear out that people of color are disproportionately affected by the rules within the criminal justice system, Carl is slow to play the race card.

“We live in a big plutocracy, yes,” he says. “But there is a way to sift through all of this without mentioning the race component and then just letting it show up and address it when it does, because it will.

“It’s in the numbers. That’s the systemic stuff, when it’s in the numbers. The embedded multiple systems continue to have these disparities show up. And they show up consistently. And they show up throughout the chain. And they show up year after year.

“There is a three-pronged approach when talking about race — one of three categories that tends to stop people, or slow them down: race itself, prejudice, and complacency.

“First, do they acknowledge themselves as racist? Most people will tell you flat out, ‘No, I’m not racist. I don’t play that game. I’m out.’ And that they’ve worked through that enough, so equivocally and deliberately, they say, ‘Nope.’

“Then, have they worked through the second prong, prejudice? ‘Well, I’ve got some, I’m working through it. I had an experience,’ or ‘I’ve seen things that make me feel a certain way, but I’m working through that.’

“That third one, though — complacency, which is privilege, which is entitlement — just smacks, because when we start talking about redirecting resources, redirecting policy-making ability, a lot of people stand up and say, ‘You mean I need less? Are you saying that I didn’t earn what I have? Because I sweated my way through college. I grinded.’

“No, it’s not us saying that, either. What it is saying is that the system was put in place to benefit one group at the expense of all the others and we’re saying that it works so well that it still operates in that way. And although the founders and framers put it in there with race as the guiding force — whether race continues to be the guiding force or not — it is still producing the same or similar results year after year after year.”

Carl is passionate about delivering his message, whether on his own or through RIC, or EXPO, or WISDOM. People on the inside, too, need to hear it. So he tries to stay in contact with those still incarcerated.

“I’m still in contact,” he says, “but not nearly to the degree that I believe I can help them. That all comes back to still being attached to the system through the Department of Community Corrections (DCC). Still being connected to DCC, not only am I not gaining access to a whole lot of things, and society, because of how it set up, is like,

‘Oh, you’re still connected to the system? You must still be a problem.’

The Department of Corrections, Carl says, is not a policy-setting entity.

“It’s difficult,” he says, “because the DOC is a policy-following entity. So when you bring up if a policy or rule is not right, they’ll tell you, ‘There’s not much we can do about

**“Carl has a great radar up for folks who come from challenging circumstances. His ability to match their language draws them in.”**

— **Seth Raymond, executive director of the Hospitality Center**

that. Tell it to the judge, tell it to Madison.’ They can shift gears on how they carry out some of this stuff, but mostly, you know, they get their marching orders and they start marching. They’re really just doing their job.”

•••

**B**orn in Chicago, Carl came to Racine with his mom and older sister to visit relatives one summer when he was six.

“We really enjoyed it,” he says, “so we pushed to come back. I guess we pushed so hard that we moved here!”

Much of his education came courtesy of the Racine Unified School District — McKinley, Starbuck, Case — but some wayward friendships as a teen set Carl on a less-than-desirable path, landing him in the Ethan Allen School for Boys, a juvenile corrections facility in Delafield, for a year when he was 15. He stood 6-foot-6 at the time, as he does today, and, looking like an adult, found himself in adult situations.

“I hustled back then,” he says. “I had two cars, two cell phones.”

From Ethan Allen, he would attend the Mack Center in Racine for one semester (while working as a teaching assistant at Winslow School) and ultimately Gateway Technical College with his eye set on a two-year associate’s degree in physical therapy.

His interests then ranged from drawing — “my friend Cory and I would draw buildings,

cars, and wrestlers in middle school,” he says — to sports, mostly soccer and swimming. He couldn’t put on enough weight to play high school football, which was his preference, and he didn’t want to play basketball — “It seemed almost too easy” — so he gravitated toward swimming. In fact, there was a time when training for the 2000 Olympics in the 200-meter freestyle had crossed his mind.

Carl is a man of many abilities and interests. Coming from Chicago, he is a big fan of trains, so the possibility of high-speed rail in the area excites him. As a kid, he was turned on by the video game SimCity — “This is infrastructure, huh? I’ll have to remember that” — and the idea of becoming an architect or civil engineer had crossed his brain dozens of times. So the prospect of designing communities now that he is free is more than just an idle thought.

Carl thinks often about the events of May 8, 2000, and how they went down. And about his mother, who had suffered a violent death just months earlier — a turning point in Carl’s life that put him over the edge that day. But he also remembers, almost fondly, how the standoff came to an end on Racine’s north side: peacefully.

“I was able to keep my life, learn from that experience, and ultimately come back to do some real good,” he says. “The officers who took me into custody were doing their jobs. They weren’t ugly, they didn’t bump my head while putting me in the car, they weren’t looking to exact any punishment on me for what I had just done. They simply said, ‘We got him, we shut this thing down, so let’s go home, fellas.’”

“The thing about models that truly serve the public interest, and gain and keep the public trust, they are restorative in nature, they are holistic.”

And what would Mom, who raised Carl



▲ The Rev. Seth Raymond, executive director of the Hospitality Center of Racine, chats with Carl after lunch one day at the Center.

along with his stepfather, say of him today?

“I would hope that she’s smiling, looking down and saying, ‘You’re doing good. You’re doing what I always wanted you to do.’”

“I make it a point to think of her often, the lessons that she taught me, and the lessons from my stepdad. The two of them together. How they operated, how they moved. I didn’t understand all of their lessons at the time, and I can’t touch base with them today to ask exactly what they meant, but I do have some clarity to figure it out.”

Now that Carl is into his sixth year of “Life: The Third Installment,” as he calls it, does he worry about falling off the wagon?

“No,” he says emphatically. “What worries me, though, is that we can’t put up a real safety net for people like me fast enough. We’re losing too many people too fast.”

“Somehow society thinks we’re doing alright with it. When I tell them that we’re not, they say, ‘Okay, so we’re not doing it. Then you do it.’ To which I say, ‘Alright, how about you release me from my contract so I can go out and fully do it.’”

“There is a campaign launching around early release and early discharge. But the way we do the work in this fight is to push for upstream policy changes so technically we’re pushing for all of us. What I want is not real freedom, real citizenship for myself; I want that for all of us. I found a way to do it for myself and that’s not nearly good enough. In fact, it’s hard. Because seeing others in my same predicament who are drowning, is like, argh. Being at the mercy and blessing of the current systems and policymakers, that’s all tentative. That’s not a real thing. That’s not real freedom, that’s not real success.”

“I’m a faithful person so prayer is important, staying focused on there being a well-lit path. I may not be able to see it, which means it’s probably still in darkness. But there is a path and I’ll find it and I’ll get on it and won’t get off.”

“Here I am, five years later, still fighting — fighting like it’s day one.”

“Because it is day one for somebody.” ●

### **Gov. Evers’ tweet on 2/16/21 related to Badger Bounceback justice system reform:**

“We can’t keep doing things the way we’ve always done them if we want to bounce back and better than we were before this pandemic hit. That’s why our Badger Bounceback agenda is about investing in people, not prisons.”

“Our justice system has put a strain on our state. We’ve failed to adequately fund alternatives to incarceration, prisons are overcrowded and we have yet to address the disproportionate impact decades of laws have had on communities of color.”

“We can keep our communities safe by holding violent offenders accountable, save money, and reform our justice system all at the same time. Because in the 21st Century, we can use science and evidence to help us make better decisions.”

“We can’t keep throwing taxpayer dollars into a system that doesn’t help our state or our people thrive. That’s why our budget overhauls our juvenile justice system, provides \$15 million to expand treatment and diversion programs, and calls for rewriting our criminal code.”

