



# On Balance

Dane County Department of  
Human Services & Dane County  
Juvenile Court Program Publication

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## Dane County Youth Justice Conference: Strengthening Communities Through Transformative Justice

*By Amanda Wiza, YJ  
Lead Social Worker*

The 2026 Youth Justice Conference held on Thursday, April 23<sup>rd</sup> at the American Family Training Center in Madison brought together

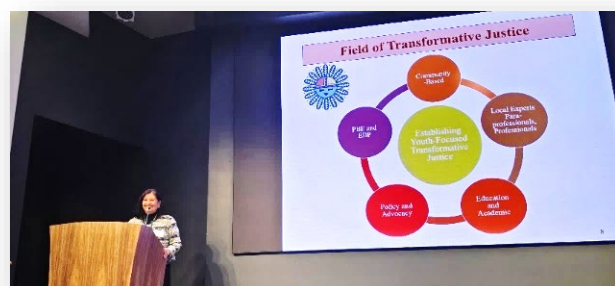


Figure 1 Ada Pecos Melton Keynote Speaker

professionals, community members, and youth to explore the evolving role of restorative and transformative justice in strengthening communities. The day-long event included an inspiring keynote address, interactive breakout sessions, and youth-led perspectives.

The keynote presentation, “Honoring Transformative Justice: Past, Present, and Future,” delivered by Ada Pecos Melton, anchored the event by connecting historical foundations with current practices and future directions in justice reform. Ms. Pecos Melton is the President/CEO of American Indian Development Associates, LLC and has 36 years of experience designing and

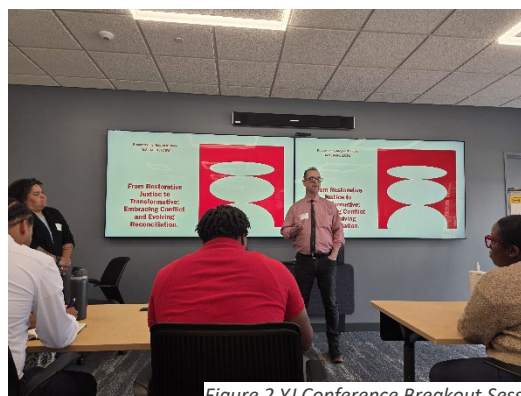


Figure 2 YJ Conference Breakout Session

managing culturally relevant studies involving tribal justice systems and programs.

Morning breakout sessions offered three distinct learning paths. One session focused on transformative justice through a cultural lens, while another provided hands-on experience with restorative justice circles. Also highlighted was a presentation on the ATTA program, a new six-month program for high-risk youth in Dane County.

Midday allowed for informal discussion and networking, and then the afternoon resumed with another set of breakout sessions, expanding on key themes. Topics included long-term programming in detention centers, a simulation exercise designed to elevate unheard voices, strategies for building resilience among youth, and approaches to moving from restorative to fully transformative justice practices. This variety allowed participants to tailor their experience based on professional interests and community needs.



Figure 3 YJ Conference Breakout Session



The conference culminated in a youth panel titled “Circle Voices: Youth Reflections on Restorative Justice.” The session centered the lived experiences of young people, offering firsthand insight into how justice practices impact their lives and

communities and how adults can help bring about positive change. By closing with youth voices, the conference reinforced its commitment to inclusion and authentic engagement.

## Q&A With Terry Jones, Program Manager at Grow Academy

### ***What experiences have shaped your approach to leadership and your role as program manager?***

My approach to leadership and my role as Program Manager has been shaped by my 7+ years working at The Grow Academy. From being on the floor day in and day out, to Supervising staff, to now managing the entire program and all that comes with it. That firsthand experience keeps me grounded in what staff and youth actually need day to day. My approach to leadership/Program Manager was shaped early on at Camp Menominee where I was the Director of Operations for 5 years. I was tasked with building programs, training staff, drafting policies and procedures, and safety compliance. I have also been shaped a lot by the Supervisors/Managers I’ve worked under throughout my career. I’ve taken pieces from each of them – whether it’s different ways of communication, how to hold individuals accountable, or how to truly support your team. Overall, I try to lead in a way that is consistent, supportive, and grounded in real experience.

***What is your approach to working with youth and system partners?***

I take a relationship-driven approach for both youth and system partners. For youth I tend to focus on validation, active listening, accountability, and meeting youth where they are. More often than not, the youth that we serve come from environments where their voices aren't heard and their opinions aren't valued. I strongly believe that at the end of the day, most people just want to be seen/heard and through giving youth a voice, confidence, accountability, and trust can be built. When it comes to system partners, I believe in open communication and being on the same page as we're all working toward a common goal. I have a lot of experience collaborating with families, mentors, social workers, and community partners; I truly value those relationships and through those relationships we can come together and provide services/supports for the youth that we serve.

***What are you looking forward to for Grow Academy? What are its current challenges?***

I am looking forward to strengthening staff development, enhancing programming, and providing more unique opportunities to youth. I believe that Grow is just scratching the surface in terms of ways we can help youth. With Grow receiving planning dollars for a possible expansion, I'm excited about the endless possibilities the future holds. There is a lot of potential and I'm excited to be a part of that. Current challenges are finding ways to allocate resources that will impact the youth and promote buy-in from their families. Also, the climate youth are growing up in now – social media, mental health challenges, lack of parental/community support, and outside influences – has a real impact on how they show up and what they need from us. We are consistently in conversation about finding ways to adapt our programming and approach so we stay relevant and effective.

***What would you like system partners, youth, and other stakeholders to know about you and your work?***

I want system partners, youth, and stakeholders to know that we (Grow) are passionate about the work that we do and are focused on meaningful and sustainable outcomes. I want people to know that I am someone that shows up and follows through with commitments. I care about the work and the impact it has on youth and their families. I value teamwork and communication, and I'm always open to feedback if it helps us do better and moves the work forward in a positive way. At the end of the day, I'm here to support the youth and teams/people that are doing the work in youth development/justice.

***What do you enjoy doing in your free time?***

In my free time I like to stay active. I play in a softball league on Monday nights in Janesville. Tennis has been a big part of my life for a long time (playing in high school and college, coaching, as well as giving private lessons). I love to golf and enjoy the peace it brings me even if I'm playing horribly. I am also a foodie, so I love trying new foods, cooking, and experimenting with different cuisines. I volunteer at the Gifts Men's Shelter in Janesville, providing the homeless population of Rock County with food, clothing, and other resources. Lastly, I am an Assistant Director/Stunt Coordinator for Door 22 Productions/The School District of Janesville. We get all 3 Middle Schools in Janesville together and put on musicals in the Spring and Summer.

# Family Finding in Dane County CYF/PEI

*By Angie Sadler, CPS Supervisor*

When removing a child is necessary for their immediate safety, CPS workers strive to minimize trauma to the child and parents. Family connections remain paramount to immediate wellbeing as well as future successful outcomes for youth. The Children, Youth & Families Division is excited to share our progress in implementing strategies to enhance Family Find & Engagement services for youth placed in out-of-home care under a CHIPS Order.

The primary goals of Family Find & Engagement services are to preserve existing connections for youth in out-of-home care, as well as increase the number of connections and relative placements. The work is a circular process that involves four phases: 1) informing and involving the parents and youth in the process of “building a village”, 2) datamining for relative information, 3) notifying known relatives of the youth’s out-of-home placement, and 4) engaging and connecting with relatives who are interested in connections or placement.

As we embark on this process alongside primary social workers, we are sharing ten lesser-known facts about Family Find & Engagement:

**#1:** The State of Wisconsin Department of Children and Families’ Family Find & Engagement Program encourages workers to attempt to notify about 40 relatives for a youth in out-of-home care.

**#2:** Finding and notifying relatives of a youth’s out-of-home placement is required by statute. Notifying relatives is required for all youth in out-of-home placement, including those with high needs who are placed in residential care centers and treatment foster homes.

**#3:** Parental permission is not required to notice individuals who meet the relative definition once a child is in out-of-home care. This can elicit many different responses from parents as they learn about this process.

**#4:** The legal definition of a relative includes ex-partners of parents who are raising a sibling, as well as individuals connected by marriage and up to the 4<sup>th</sup> degree relative.

**#5:** If a youth is removed post-adoption, birth relatives can only be contacted with a signed consent from the legal (adoptive) parent.

**#6:** Myths that encourage nonrelative foster care placements continue inside the system as well as in the general public. Research continues to prove children do best if they remain connected to their families.

**#7:** Any trusted adult can engage in conversations around connections with older youth. DCF provides several activities that can enhance these conversations on their Family Find & Engagement website: [Wisconsin Permanency Consultation Programs](#)

**#8:** If a parent is requesting placement, primary workers can proactively engage parents in conversations about relative connections prior to an out-of-home placement. Consent is required to contact relatives prior to out-of-home placement.

**#9:** The statutes allow sharing information with relatives, without consent, to the extent to facilitate a connection to the child. Information that goes beyond that requires signed consent by a parent.

**#10:** Relative connection is important. Confidentiality is also important. When in doubt, we consult with legal partners and we err on the side of caution.

As more families are served with these enhanced strategies, we anticipate questions will come up from our partners. We encourage you to reach out to CYF Staff Nikki Moriarity or Francisco Lozano with questions and ideas!

## Meet Albert Watson, Dane County JRC Superintendent



My name is Albert Watson and I am the Superintendent of the Dane County Juvenile Detention Center and ATTA Program. I have been with Dane County since 2008 as a Juvenile Court Worker and became Lead Worker in 2019. I was also the President of the Wisconsin Juvenile Detention Association from 2016-2020. I am the father of 2 amazing kids, Miraya (20) and Cove (3). I cater BBQ in my spare time and enjoy playing pickleball if I can find someone to play with! I believe in following policy, but I also believe in doing what makes sense. At Dane County Juvenile Detention, no matter what a youth has been doing in the community, when a youth comes to our facility, that youth will be treated like the child that they are. I learned that philosophy from retired Superintendent Dennis McClain and stand on it! We celebrate holidays, birthdays, and our Wednesday Cooking program remains the most popular group activity we have in our facility.

## Innovation in Action: YJP Youth Turned Ideas Into Impact



Figure 5 Youth Program CEOs of Tomorrow

*By Joe Muellenberg, YJP Program Leader*

This winter, Youth Justice & Prevention (YJP) participants completed a full nine-week youth business incubator program in partnership with CEOs of Tomorrow—and the results were remarkable.

Through the These Teens Mean Business curriculum, youth built practical skills in business development, finance, and marketing. More importantly, they had the opportunity to apply those lessons in a hands-on, meaningful way by creating and testing their own soap micro-businesses. From product design and branding to understanding consumer appeal, participants engaged in every stage of the entrepreneurial process.

What made this experience especially powerful was how clearly it demonstrated the value of innovation in youth programming. Rather than learning in theory alone, youth were trusted to build

something real, make decisions, solve problems, and see the direct results of their work. They sold their products at a market sale event, generated revenue, and experienced the pride that comes from creating something of value.

The program also reinforced the importance of community connection and social responsibility. Participants donated a portion of their profits to Freedom Inc., giving them the opportunity to practice social entrepreneurship and understand how business success can also support local impact.

For staff who work directly with young people, this program is a strong example of what can happen when we combine skill-building, creativity, and real-world application. The youth who participated gained more than business knowledge – they strengthened confidence, responsibility, teamwork, and problem-solving skills that will serve them well far beyond the program.



Figure 6 Youth Program CEOs of Tomorrow

## Summer Programming/Employment Opportunities for Youth

*By Amanda Wiza, YJ Lead Social Worker*

Summer is fast approaching, which means it's time to look ahead at the variety of summer programming options available to youth in the area. Below are some highlighted opportunities designed to empower Dane County youth through education, experiences, and social-skill building.

**YJP Summer Groups:** For youth currently involved in the Dane County Juvenile Court program, DCDHS Program Leaders will again be hosting Youth Justice & Prevention Summer Groups.

The *GRIT* program will be hosting their summer groups for youth connected to GRIT workers throughout Dane County, which will include various activities like experiential field trips, employment exploration, Restorative Justice trainings, and both paid and volunteer work with local organizations.

The Court Diversion Unit Program Leaders will be hosting a summer Boys group for low-medium risk-level youth beginning June 23<sup>rd</sup> running through mid-August. This group will feature field trips, guest speakers and social skill building activities. Program Leaders will also be hosting a Girls Group this summer. Please connect with the youth's assigned DCDHS Youth Justice Social Worker for information regarding the referral process and openings.

**MADYM:** The STEM-based educational organization MADYM has multiple programs throughout the summer for both middle and high school youth, including a special session just for girls. Topics include, sustainability solutions, artificial intelligence, robotics, video game development and a creator's lab. Registration can be completed online: [Maydm](#)

**CEOs of Tomorrow** has several summer programming opportunities for youth focused on foundational business and entrepreneurial skill-building. This includes both virtual and in-person opportunities with scholarships available. [CEOs of Tomorrow](#)

**Junior Naturalist Camp:** For middle school youth, Lussier Heritage Center will be hosting their first Junior Naturalist Summer Camp with fee assistance available. This program is for youth up to 14 years of age. [Junior Naturalist Summer Camp](#)

**MSCR Summer Programming:** MSCR is offering a variety of programming for youth in Madison. See their website for more details: <https://www.mschr.org/summer-camps/>

**Madison Libraries:** Madison libraries have a plethora of summer programming available for youth and families. <https://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/spaces/families>

**Holiday Home Camp:** Lake Geneva Fresh Air Association hosts a Holiday Home Camp which provides a safe, fun, and supportive camp experience for teens. Ideal for first time campers. Scholarships and/or financial assistance is available as is transportation from the Madison area. [Summer Camp at HHC – LGFAA](#). There are sessions all throughout the summer.

**Job Opportunities:** Youth connected with Briarpatch Youth Services can access their Youth Job Center services for a variety of opportunities for employment and mentorship. There are upcoming interview dates in May for Farm and Garden Hiring Fair. For more information: [Youth Employment Services | Briarpatch Youth Services Youth Services](#)

## Remembering Ami

*By Julie Ahnen, CPS Manager*

Ami Rodland, known professionally as Ami Orlin, passed away on January 9, 2026. She dedicated much of her life to serving children and families, leaving a profound mark as a longtime employee of the Dane County Department of Human Services (DCDHS). Ami was a leader, teacher, and mentor, guiding countless staff members throughout her career. Notably, she served as the CPS Manager until her retirement in 2010. Her professional journey began as a child welfare worker for the City of Madison, before she transitioned to Dane County. Ami's career started in the early 1980s, a period when the complexities of child neglect and sexual abuse were gaining increased attention and awareness.

In the early 1990s, Ami advanced to the role of CPS Supervisor. She played a pivotal role in establishing Safe Harbor, which has become a renowned Child Advocacy Center in Dane County. Ami built strong relationships with local experts and consistently promoted ongoing staff training as new information and best practices emerged in the field. She took a leave of absence to serve as the first Executive Director of Safe Harbor, later returning to DCDHS as CPS Manager. Ami led large groups of CPS staff and law enforcement officers through multiple rounds of training focused on forensic interviewing. Many

children of CPS staff participated as practice interviewees, resulting in numerous memorable and humorous stories from those sessions.

Ami was known for her vigorous and heartfelt advocacy for children and families, both professionally and personally. At her Celebration of Life, she was remembered as “fierce” and “a force” in championing the causes she cared deeply about. Ami was an exceptional teacher and a supportive supervisor who valued people as whole individuals, recognizing the importance of bringing one's full self to the workplace. Her infectious sense of humor, bright smile, and distinctive laugh left lasting impressions on those around her.

A proud New Yorker, Ami cherished her family and friends. She felt immense pride when her son graduated college and pursued a successful career as a pilot. Ami had a passion for travel and cuisine, and she was renowned for her cooking skills. Following her retirement, she supervised groups of UW School of Social Work students, volunteered at DAIS and Rainbow, and contributed to fundraising efforts at Rainbow and Safe Harbor. Her love of theater and music was evident in her years as an usher at the Overture Center.

Ami confronted a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease with remarkable grace and humor. During her Celebration of Life, many recalled how Ami’s true spirit continued to shine, even in her final days. I learned so much from Ami and remain grateful for the opportunity to have had her as my mentor and supervisor for many years.



You're Invited to the Annual

# Youth Justice & Prevention Awards Banquet

To honor, recognize and celebrate the Youth and Caregivers who have experienced great successes in collaboration with the staff and Dane County Partners who support them.

WED JUNE 24 2026

FROM 5:00 - 7:30 PM

📍 At the Alliant Energy Center  
1919 Alliant Energy Center Way, Madison WI. 53713

Please RSVP all members in your party by June 5  
by filling out the form below:

<https://forms.cloud.microsoft/g/gJ2S7qftVn>

The image above is a Flyer for the Youth Justice and Prevention Awards Banquet on Wednesday June 24th 2026 from 5:30PM to 7:30PM. The event is located at 1919 Alliant Energy Center Way, Madison, WI 53713. Please RSVP by June 5th. Click Here to RSVP