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Introduction

The juvenile court system was established with the goal of diverting young offenders from the destructive punishments of adult criminal courts and ensuring rehabilitation of the individual juveniles. In Pennsylvania, the system's guiding principle is balanced and restorative justice that allows for balancing community protection needs with providing accountability and competency development for children who are adjudicated delinquent.

This principle is incorporated into the purpose clause of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Act (1976/2010a). In juvenile court, once a child is adjudicated delinquent — i.e., found to have committed an offense beyond a reasonable doubt and found to be in need of treatments, services, and/or rehabilitation — then the court moves to disposition, which is the term used for “sentencing” in juvenile court. In Pennsylvania, the court may impose a wide array of conditions at disposition, but the primary decision is whether the child will be at home on probation or placed in a juvenile justice facility (Pennsylvania Juvenile Act, 1976/2010b). A child's case remains open until the juvenile court believes that the terms of disposition have been satisfactorily completed or until the child's 21st birthday, whichever comes first (Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, 2005).

In Allegheny County in 2015, there were 3,328 referrals to the juvenile probation system and 2,672 youth admissions to secure detention and alternative-to-detention facilities. Of the referrals

Key Points

- The staggeringly disproportionate numbers of youth of color in the juvenile court system in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, compelled the Pittsburgh Foundation to launch the Youth Voices Juvenile Justice Pilot project. The initiative sought to learn from youth who have firsthand knowledge of the juvenile court system and from those at risk of such an experience in order to inform the foundation's efforts to improve outcomes for youth.
- This article outlines the foundation's process for engaging youth and stakeholders in a meaningful way to improve its grantmaking and to better support systems change that leads to reducing youth court involvement through assessment of policies and practices that create the school-to-prison pipeline.
- To ensure solutions were driven by affected youth instead of the foundation's own agenda, discussion groups planned in partnership with youth-serving organizations empowered young people to reflect on events that impacted their lives, on their hopes and dreams for the future, and on ways the juvenile court system can listen to their voices and respond with meaningful changes.

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Key Points (continued)

- An analysis of the discussions was shared with participating youth and members of an advisory group to confirm the findings, which included recommendations on school discipline reforms, greater access to diversion and prevention programs, and changes to court-related fees, fines, and restitution policies. The recommendations have informed the foundation's grantmaking, and over the past three years led to the funding of 23 grants totaling \$1.4 million.
- The project revealed the importance of respectfully listening to and learning from youth to understand the circumstances affecting the quality of their lives, and of ensuring that insights from youth will result in more effective models for change.

to juvenile probation, 76% were nonviolent cases. The most common charges involved drugs, theft, and failure to pay court fines (Carlino & Clark, 2015; Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). In terms of detention, in 2013 fewer than 25% of youth in confinement in Pennsylvania had committed a violent crime, such as homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, or sexual assault (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). Nationally, nearly 40% of detained youth have committed a technical violation of probation or a drug possession or low-level property offense.

In the past three decades, schools have become a major source of referrals to the juvenile court system — a practice referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline. Minor disciplinary incidents that used to be handled by school administrators and counselors are now frequently referred to law enforcement, particularly at schools in poor communities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Advancement Project, 2005). However, a youth's acting-out behavior is often the result or symptom of a mental health need that has gone undiagnosed or untreated (Skowrya & Coccozza, 2006). In Allegheny County, young Black women are 10 times more likely than young

white women to be referred to the juvenile court system; young Black men face such referrals at a rate seven times higher than their white counterparts. Black youths in the county are referred to the juvenile court system at a higher rate than Black youths are across the nation, and white youths in the county are referred to the system at lower rates than they are nationally. Pittsburgh Public Schools police refer Black girls to the juvenile court system more than to any other entity, and most arrests made by Pittsburgh Public Schools police are for minor offenses that are not safety related (Black Girls Equity Alliance, 2020).

Trauma and mental health issues are common threads that link the diverse array of youth in the juvenile court system. Nearly 70% of youth involved with the court system have been found to have at least one mental health condition, compared to 22% of youth in the general population (Teplin, Abram, McClelland, & Dulcan, 2003; Coccozza & Shufelt, 2006; Teplin et al., 2013). Evidence suggests that more than 90% of girls and two-thirds of boys in the juvenile court system have experienced some type of abuse (Acoca, 1999; Holsinger, Belknap, & Sutherland, 1999). In addition, nearly 30% of juvenile court-involved youth have a disorder that seriously disrupts functioning; the most common are disruptive disorders, anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders (Coccozza & Shufelt, 2006). Childhood trauma and victimization are risk factors that can double the likelihood of juvenile delinquency (Herrenkohl, Maguin, Hawkins, Abbott, & Catalano, 2000). These data demonstrate how a lack of safety leads many youths who are deemed “delinquent” to “act out.”

Inequity in the rates of juvenile probation involvement for youth of color and by gender has been highlighted nationally and locally (Rovner, 2014). Research conducted by the National Women's Law Center found that over the past two decades, girls' involvement with the juvenile justice system from courts through incarceration saw sizeable increases: Arrests increased 45%, court caseloads rose by 40%, and detentions increased by 40%,

while post-adjudication placement rose by 42% (Sherman & Black, 2015). In a comparison by race using 2009 delinquency data, Puzanchera, Adams, & Hockenberry (2012) highlight the remarkably persistent and disproportionately high rates of Black youth in the juvenile court system: The vast majority (74%) of referrals for probation were young men; of these, 69% were Black and 25% were white (Rovner, 2014). In Allegheny County, Black youth accounted for 20% of residents ages 10 through 17, but accounted for 76% of the population screened at detention intake (Puzanchera et al., 2012). And in the county for 2012, the rate of detention for Black youth was 19 times higher than for white youth: 114 per 1,000 compared to six per 1,000, respectively (Burns Institute, 2019).

For the Pittsburgh Foundation, which had selected young people ages 12 to 24 as a core population of focus for grantmaking, juvenile justice emerged as a key issue and the Youth Voices Juvenile Justice Pilot project was born. The goal of this initiative was to learn from and with youth who have firsthand knowledge of or are at risk of encounters with the juvenile court system in order to inform and shape the foundation's efforts to improve outcomes for youth. Engaging individuals most impacted by an issue to guide the foundation's understanding of context and opportunities for intervention — in this case, youth involved in the juvenile court system — is a best practice for promoting and achieving equity. This inclusion of the voices of those most impacted is the basis for participatory grantmaking that “helps shift the traditional power imbalances that exist in philanthropy” (McCoy, 2019, para. 2). It also ensures that solutions work for those they serve, and it helps to create sustained positive impact in communities while fostering trust in foundation–community relationships (Feierabend & Merenda, 2014).

The objective of this article is to report on the outcome of an inclusive and participatory approach to understand those most impacted by the systems that philanthropy aims to influence, and how their voices can be used to influence all aspects of philanthropic practice — grantmaking, convening, donor engagement,

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and policy and advocacy platforms — to advance systems-change efforts and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

Methods

In the fall of 2015, the Pittsburgh Foundation's program and policy department launched the Youth Voices Juvenile Justice Pilot project with the following goals:

- Expand the foundation's knowledge regarding one of the Pittsburgh Foundation's target populations: young people ages 12 to 24.
- Identify a series of strategies designed to ethically gather, assess, and share the firsthand knowledge of the target population.
- Use these data to add to existing quantitative data.
- Collaborate with youth-service providers and advocates to inform the foundation's understanding and identify opportunities to better serve the target population.
- Identify opportunities for systems change with members of the target population through grantmaking, convening, and policy and advocacy initiatives.

Core to this pilot were conversations with youth. Careful planning for the discussion sessions was undertaken with a commitment to fostering ethical, transparent conversations; having on-site support staff to help with immediate problems; and generating safe and creative activities to learn about the factors impacting youth experiencing the juvenile court system. As a first step, the foundation convened a group of adults and provider agencies to inform the discussions and interpret the data and findings. The organizations included local youth-serving organizations that have established close relationships with youth vulnerable to or with active involvement in the juvenile court system. In addition, relationships were established with five intermediary organizations and the youth they work with and serve. Two young adults were trained and paid to co-facilitate the five discussion groups: one who identified as woman and one who identified as a man, both with histories of juvenile court system involvement, and both employed by a human services agency as case managers for youth actively involved in the system.

During the sessions, participants were asked to reflect on a variety of topics, such as factors and events in their lives that brought them to where they are today, and on how their own voices and opinions have or have not influenced their experience. They were also asked to share their suggestions for changes to the juvenile court system that would better serve young people like them. A professional artist used visual note-taking techniques to sketch out participants' comments to further amplify their voices and to illustrate the powerful cycles that can prevent young people from reaching their potential. (See Figure 1.)

Focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and a qualitative analysis of the resulting data was conducted and implemented according to established standards (Bernard, 2000). Intermediary partner organizations were provided a copy of their transcribed discussions and given an opportunity to further illustrate concepts explored during the initial session; no changes were requested by our study

During the eight-month pilot, five discussion groups were conducted with 53 youth with an average age of 18. The vast majority had current or previous experience with the juvenile court system and had been previously suspended from school. They described the context of and varied influences on their lives, including hunger and homelessness, disruptive schools, and family addictions.

participants. Two of the project investigators analyzed the transcripts, and thematic codes were developed and applied to relevant segments of text. Consistent with Spradley's (1979) guidelines for conducting qualitative data analysis, as additional data were gathered, segments of the text were reviewed for recurring themes. The results that follow present those that were mentioned most frequently during the interview process.

Results

During the eight-month pilot, five discussion groups were conducted with 53 youth with an average age of 18. The vast majority had current or previous experience with the juvenile court system and had been previously suspended from school. They described the context of and varied influences on their lives, including hunger and homelessness, disruptive schools, and family addictions. Amber Knight, a trained community co-facilitator of the discussion sessions with the Pittsburgh Foundation's research who has her own lived experience with the juvenile justice system, summed up their narratives: "It's the

same story, with different storylines — neglect, and wanting more for themselves, their child or family” (O’Toole, 2017, para. 8). The participants voiced their frustrations with encounters with the juvenile court system and expressed a strong desire to be involved in decisions that affect their futures.

The discussion groups were designed by the foundation to be more than casual question-and-answer sessions; they were invitations to young people to share their experiences to help others examine, understand, and eventually transform systems that affect their lives. There was a commitment to ethical, transparent conversations; on-site support staff to help with immediate problems; and creative activities. The foundation convened a group of adults and provider agencies — a group that included Knight, who now served the Allegheny County Department of Human Services as a youth support partner — to guide the discussions and interpret the data and findings.

The young people arrived ready to share their experiences, both positive and negative. Despite their anger and confusion, they were often able to recall an adult — a foster parent, juvenile probation officer, caseworker, or teacher — whose interventions or advice had helped them overcome challenges and feel cared for. The young men and women asked for more adult confidants who could help them understand school placements, foster homes, or criminal charges, and could explain the choices available to them within those systems and help them to develop strategies to be successful and happy. The themes were shared back with the participants for their feedback.

The results of the focus groups included a report (Pittsburgh Foundation, 2017) that highlighted the themes emerging from the conversations and shared quotes from the participants. (See Table 1.) The report also presented their recommendations for the juvenile justice system and youth-serving organizations on how to better address their concerns. (See Table 2 on page 87.) The report was distributed to our local partners and shared with and by local and regional

media as well as nonprofit and philanthropic publications.

The report helped shape the juvenile court grantmaking initiative launched in 2017 by the Pittsburgh Foundation. Over the last three years, the foundation has awarded 23 grants totaling \$1.4 million; about 25% were to support interventions and 75% funded prevention programming. Specifically, grants from 2017 to 2020 have resulted in positive academic outcomes, including a 65% to 90% improvement in grade point average and 50% to 80% reduction in truancy. Health screenings and follow-up care were received by 1,275 youths. Thirty-five youths found employment and at six months had retained those jobs, and 62 youths were diverted from juvenile probation. In addressing recommendations from the focus groups for changes in the juvenile justice system, schools, and social services, the grants most frequently funded efforts to prevent and divert youth involvement in the court system, provide support from caring adults and mental health resources, engage youth as advocates, and to provide training opportunities. Common core strategies of these grants included a focus on academic outcomes, workforce and employment, and mental and physical health.

One example of a funded initiative is a formal, youth-focused diversion effort designed to give young people who commit a nonviolent, low- to medium-level offense the opportunity to remain in the community while the system addresses their needs, rather than face prosecution, conviction, and incarceration. This intervention is implemented in close partnership with local law enforcement, the Allegheny County Juvenile Probation Department, the city of Pittsburgh’s housing authority, the county’s district attorney’s office, identified family members, and other community stakeholders. It utilizes community-based service providers that support evidence-based, outcome-oriented programs and trauma-informed care resulting in academic success, personal and career development, good citizenship, savings for taxpayers, and a stronger community. Another funded initiative supports free, independent legal representation — counsel

TABLE 1 Themes From Youth Focus Groups: A Summary

Theme No. 1: The Importance of Listening to the Lived Experience of Youth
<p>Participants described how the circumstances in which they live and learn are significant factors in the challenges they face, especially involvement in the juvenile court system.</p> <p><i>"My mom tried to kill me, and I had to fight to survive, and I had to fight my mom, and then I got in trouble for fighting her."</i></p> <p><i>"Kids can get in trouble for smaller things that add up, like possession of weed or missing school, and then eventually they are just looked at as criminals and end up on probation."</i></p> <p><i>"I ran away when I was 12. It was the situation with my family."</i></p>
Theme No. 2: Differences in System Experience Based on Race and Gender
<p>Youth participants of color said they believed that their experiences might have been different if they were white, although many felt that being poor and having limited resources were the most important factors. They said they often felt they did not receive the benefit of the doubt, and made comments that demonstrated their awareness that white youth are frequently tracked into mental health services for behaviors that send Black youth to juvenile court.</p> <p><i>"Sometimes, especially in Black culture or inner-city culture, a lot of females are raised to be tough and hard and independent. So we're coming off as angry; that's all we know how to be, that's what we were taught since we were born, to be this person. It means you're out here in these streets because that's all you know. Your parents are teaching you how to take care of your family from a very small age."</i></p> <p><i>"My little brother was really young when he was put on probation. Him and his friends were shooting guns up in the air. He was immediately taken in handcuffs. His friend who was white just was sent to his mom. And they were doing the same exact thing. But my brother never got out of that cycle. He was treated like an animal and forced through [an alternative school], and he graduated without even knowing how to read properly. I would say it was a Black thing in his situation. No one said, 'Let me help him figure out what's going on. He can't read. Maybe that's why he's been acting out in school, because he's embarrassed.' ... So I believe it was a Black thing for him."</i></p>
Theme No. 3: Physical and Sexual Abuse
<p>A number of young women shared stories of sexual harassment and assault that they and other young women experienced in their homes, communities, schools, and programs.</p> <p><i>"I went to [an alternative school]; that's basically where it all started. The teacher was messing with me on a bad day. I was on my menstrual and I had my head down, and, um, and he came over and he touched me, and I don't like the way, 'cause he walks around with like a permanent boner, basically [others laughing, saying 'gross'], and I, like, turned around, like, whoa! I snapped, 'Don't touch me,' and I jumped up and he doinked me [touched his finger to her forehead], and I punched him in the face. Like, 'I was already uncomfortable with you putting your hands on me!'"</i></p> <p><i>"I went to this interview at [an independent living facility], and the dude's gonna be like, 'I can give you whatever you need — cock [said under his breath],' I swear. ... I swear to God, he said it like that: 'Cock!' And then he was like, 'Do you drink?' I said, 'Yeah, sometimes,' and he said, 'What if you drink with somebody like me, drink you right up out of your clothes?'"</i></p>

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that is critical at the start of a youth's involvement in a court. The collateral consequences of a juvenile delinquency adjudication include negative employment background checks, removal or exclusion from public housing, loss of driver's license privileges, exclusion from military

service, and notice to school administrators of involvement in the court system. Other grants were provided to support a network of prevention-oriented, high-quality, out-of-school-time programs that engage youth in a variety of safe, caring, and supportive activities.

TABLE 1 Themes From Youth Focus Groups: A Summary (continued)

Theme No. 4: Criminalization of Youth Behavior in Schools and the Community

The youth participants regard current disciplinary practices and guidelines in schools and other youth-serving systems as a setup where adults are just waiting for kids to make a mistake, and as soon as they do, label them as delinquents.

“I just wouldn’t lock kids up that quickly; small things shouldn’t lead to probation or the label of probation that makes them a ‘bad kid.’ It always starts with in-school probation, and then escalates from there.”

“Adults are just waiting for kids to mess up!”

Theme No. 5: Access to Caring, Supportive Adults and Mental Health Services

Youth expressed the need for someone to listen to them, care, understand, share important information and options about their case, and, most of all, to believe in them. Across all the sessions, youth shared that they felt that the adults in systems that serve them are, overall, good people trying to help and just “doing their job,” but only to get them to the next step in a process and not focused on their future.

“They could just be like, ‘How are you feeling today? Is anything on your mind? Did you eat? Are you OK?’ I just like for people to show me that they care.”

“I want to say that the person that made a difference in my life was my youth support partner. She was the only one who was coming out there saying ‘Cut it out; you can do better.’... She was believing that I could do better. ... She was the only one that had some faith in me, so once I started listening to what she was saying, that she was believing in me, that’s what made me want to start changing.”

Theme No. 6: Race, Disproportionality, and Institutional Neglect

Youth participants said that youth-serving systems were not doing enough to support them. They highlighted a variety of concerns, including classes that lack racial sensitivity, instruction that is culturally insensitive and that promotes negative self-images for youth of color, and issues of structural racism.

“If we kill somebody, we go to jail. If cops kill somebody, they get a slap on the wrist.”

“However they’re feeling that day, that’s how they’re going to prosecute. Say I’m a judge and I’m mad today because my kids got in trouble. ... I’m going to give them a harder sentence just because I’m mad, or less because I’m feeling grateful to be alive that day.”

Theme No. 7: Hopes and Dreams

At the end of each group discussion, participants were invited to respond to the following question, in writing: “What is a hope or dream that you have for the future?”

“Go back to school for social work, to become a mental health service provider to help kids in the system.”

“My hopes and dreams are to just be happy — I think I deserve it.”

“To live.”

“I wanna go to the Army and be the best mother I can be. I wanna be independent so I can be on my own and be a role model for my son so he can grow up not needing nobody, ‘cause nobody has your back.”

Discussion

This article outlines a process for engaging youth and stakeholders in a meaningful way to improve the Pittsburgh Foundation’s grantmaking and to better support systems change, which is defined as reducing youth court

involvement through assessment of policies and practices that create the school-to-prison pipeline. It was designed to be responsive to the needs of those most impacted, and critical to its success was engaging with youth through organizations that had trusted relationships with them.

TABLE 2 Recommendations From Youth Focus Groups

Recommendation 1	Identify opportunities to address disproportionate system involvement among youth of color or with a focus on girls of color.
Recommendation 2	Support reform of school culture, curriculum, and disciplinary policies.
Recommendation 3	Identify opportunities to support prevention and diversion initiatives.
Recommendation 4	Identify opportunities to increase access to caring adults and mental health services.
Recommendation 5	Engage youth as advocates against system involvement by integrating their voices as agents of change among their peers and in their communities.
Recommendation 6	Support efforts to reform the system of restitution and court-related fees.
Recommendation 7	Explore and provide support for interdisciplinary training opportunities — for youth, families, and adults working in multiple spaces in schools, the community, and the juvenile court system — to promote developmentally appropriate, race-positive, gender-specific, tailored practices that are trauma-informed.
Recommendation 8	Support initiatives that combine data with youth expertise to identify and address disparities.

This approach also demonstrates the impact the Youth Voices Juvenile Justice Pilot program continues to have on the foundation’s grant-making and its relationships with grantees, policymakers, and other agents of systems change. The immediate distribution of grants to organizations working to prevent youth involvement in the juvenile court system, which was guided by recommendations from the report, was critical to maintaining relationships and continuing to build trust.

These relationships and the grantmaking are ongoing. In 2020, the foundation formally re-engaged its group of pilot grantees to understand how needs of youth have evolved. In February 2020, we surveyed these grantees to determine whether the report’s recommendations from participating youth are relevant three years later and to discover what new issues may have emerged. For all 14 survey respondents, the recommendations still resonated and remained top priorities

in their own work, especially in training for youth, youth advocates, and school reform.

The survey also informed a convening of 23 grantees facilitated by foundation staff to hear from those working on the ground with youth and to understand the priorities among those experts with more of a focus on opportunities for systems change, and resulted in a request for proposals (RFP) for systems-change work locally. The focus areas that emerged from that process include an emphasis on changes to school climate and practices, such as revising discipline policies that perpetuate racial disparities and the school-to-prison pipeline; diversion initiatives and programs that redirect and prevent youth from becoming involved in the juvenile justice system; and changing policies regarding court fees and fines.¹

In addition to giving the foundation the opportunity to learn about whether the funded

¹ Funding decisions for this RFP were in process at the time of submission.

[T]he Youth Voices Juvenile Justice Pilot program also has had an influence on policy work. One example of this is the findings on the devastating impact of juvenile court fees and fines.

projects had achieved its grantmaking goals, these convenings were popular among the grantees themselves. Prior to the meetings they engaged in planning for the bigger gatherings, which helped to create more productive convenings. Grantees found community in coming together and learning about both the successes and challenges of each other's work. As expected, the grantees sometimes faced similar challenges in creating large-scale systems change, but the camaraderie was essential in continuing to fuel the work of their own organizations. We learned from participants that these convenings might be more effective if they happened more consistently and, in some cases, went longer to create more space for generative and collaborative thinking. We intend to implement these recommendations in 2021.

In addition to its primary focus on improving the foundation's grantmaking to support better outcomes for young people in connection with the juvenile justice system, the Youth Voices Juvenile Justice Pilot program also has had an influence on policy work. One example of this is the findings on the devastating impact of juvenile court fees and fines. Nearly every state imposes costs on children, a burden that leads to more instability for families already in financial distress. In October 2020, foundation staff submitted a statement to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court Procedural Rules Committee recommending revisions to the court's fees and fines policies. In addition to writing letters and public comment, foundation staff have shared information with

partner agencies as well as opportunities for them to advocate for these revisions.

This work was furthered through two projects that centered on sharing the juvenile justice initiative with the foundation's donor community. The first engagement project, the Explore Series, was an opportunity for donors to hear presentations from local nonprofits working to prevent or address the long- and short-term consequences of juvenile court involvement. The second project, the Juvenile Court Giving Circle, drew together donors and supporters over eight working sessions to learn more about the structure of the juvenile court system from community partners who are deeply engaged in this work. In the end, the giving circle granted \$75,000 to support programs that are proactively identifying at-risk youth and providing prevention services and programs to prevent engagement or re-engagement with the court.

Future focus groups elevating youth voices should include those with disabilities and who identify as LGBTQ. During our fall convening of juvenile justice grantees and the RFP process that followed, we worked with community partners and agencies to think about how to include youth voices in their proposals and in the foundation's own learnings, and plan to build on that work in 2021.

Overall, the benefit of deep learning, grantmaking that centers and amplifies the voices of those most impacted, and deeper relationships with community partners doing the work on the ground are vital to accomplishing systems change.

Conclusion

The stories of challenge and hope shared by these courageous youth participants underscored for us their remarkable resilience.

As one youth participant shared, "It is so easy to get into the juvenile system and so hard to get out." Youth are only "at-risk" when they are inadequately served by adults in the systems that surround them. The purpose of the Youth Voices Juvenile Justice Pilot project is to center

and elevate the voices of youth, who are experts on their own experience and most impacted by the issues at the center of their involvement with the juvenile justice system. As another youth shared in a focus group, “A lot of things happened that got me there, and nobody ever went back and asked me what happened and how I had got there.”

This process, and the grantmaking, policy, and donor engagement that has resulted from it, remind us that potential solutions for how to effectively support youth start with listening carefully to their voices, sharing their recommendations, and committing to an agenda that centers their priorities — not the system's priorities. Engaging thoughtfully, ethically, in a developmentally appropriate way, and in partnership with those most impacted by the issues that a foundation might address is the most effective way to identify necessary change and how to achieve it.

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