

PROJECT RISE

LEADER PROFILE: MARK MERTENS

“We’re going to transform youth corrections. We’re going to make it better for the kids that need us the most and in turn, improve the community.” - Mark Mertens

Mark Mertens joined the Milwaukee County Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) as administrator in 2015 to lead significant reforms in the youth justice system through policy and program development. His goals are to reduce youth recidivism and improve access to community-based alternatives to corrections, rooted in evidence-based practices.

Mertens is nationally recognized in the field of youth justice for his reform initiatives. As part of the state policy reform, he participated in the development of the Wisconsin Juvenile Justice Practice Model in 2015. Prior to that, he was appointed by state superintendent of schools to serve on a task force to address alternatives to suspensions and expulsions in Wisconsin public schools. He also served on former Governor Doyle’s Juvenile Corrections Review Committee and recommended closing two youth correctional institutions to reduce the inappropriate use of jails for youth.

Prior to joining DYFS, Mertens served as the manager for the Youth and Family Services Division for 11 years in Outagamie County. He was invited to be a part of the MacArthur Foundation Models for Change as a site leader in one of three sites in Wisconsin working to address Racial and Ethnic Disparities (RED) in the system. Mertens made strides in successfully reducing racial and ethnic disparities at time of arrest, where the greatest disparity existed.

Mertens is currently a member of the Milwaukee County Community Justice Council, the Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice, and serves on the leadership committee for the Wisconsin Juvenile Justice Network. He earned his masters in social work from University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee and his bachelors of arts in psychology from University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire.

