

Ed Murray Calls for "Second Look" at Design Plans for New Juvenile Detention Center

by [Ana Sofia Knaufl](#) • Jan 30, 2017 at 6:55 pm

The Stranger



Anti-youth jail activists demonstrated outside the proposed site for the Children and Family Justice Center on Jan. 12. ASK

Just before Christmas, anti-youth jail activists [demonstrated outside of Seattle Mayor Ed Murray's house](#), demanding that he speak out against the proposed Children and Family Justice Center. The \$210 million facility, which would replace the existing King County Youth Detention Center with a building that offers more social services and fewer jail beds, has been [fiercely fought](#) by anti-incarceration advocates. The new center was [approved by voters](#) in 2012.

Activists with [#BlocktheBunker](#) and [Ending the Prison Industrial Complex \(EPIC\)](#), among other organizations, have repeatedly called on Murray and King County Executive Dow Constantine to denounce the new youth jail. Late last year, Murray said the decision to go forward with the project was ultimately up to the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections, which [eventually issued the construction permits](#).

But now Murray may be slightly changing his tune. This evening, the mayor's office sent [this letter \(PDF\)](#) to Constantine and King County Superior Court Judge Laura Inveen, requesting that they review design plans for the youth jail. Murray said he's making the request because "new evidence, the continued decline of incarcerated youth in our

community, and the need for considering public concerns all point toward reexamining aspects of this facility." Here's Murray's full letter:

January 30, 2017

The Honorable Dow Constantine King County Executive
401 5th Ave. Suite 800
Seattle, WA 98104

The Honorable Laura Inveen
Presiding Judge, King County Superior Court 516 3rd Ave, Room C-203
Seattle, WA 98104

Dear Executive Constantine and Presiding Judge Inveen:

The City of Seattle and King County are partnering on several efforts that contribute to our shared goal to significantly reduce youth incarceration. It is in that spirit of collaboration that I am writing to share with you some thoughts about the proposed King County Youth Justice Center. Together, through our data and research driven strategic work, we have dramatically reduced youth incarceration in our communities. This is due in no small part to the work being done by the King County Juvenile Justice Steering Committee. The Committee should be credited for developing innovative programs that are reducing incarceration rates. This downward trend from our data suggests progress is being made. But, we have a long road ahead and the work is increasingly challenging to reach our vision of zero youth detention. We must ensure that all our respective policies, programs, and facilities, drive us towards that goal.

I have and will continue to respect that the City's role in the new youth detention center is a technical permitting function, legally separated from public policy decision making, and recognize that the fate of this project is not a discretionary decision the City can make. Beyond the City's official technical role, I also recognize that the County Executive and Judicial branch have more direct experience, expertise and analysis on related facility needs and policy priorities.

Furthermore, from what I have gathered in briefings with my staff, the project goals related to centralizing the various court and support services in the new facility represent productive efforts toward creating more seamless, accessible, and effective service delivery for the individuals and families who are impacted by the justice system.

Despite these positive intentions, public concern continues to grow about this project. Hearing this concern, I requested that my staff carry out additional analysis and research to provide me with a deeper understanding of the size and scope of King County's current project plans, as well as an examination of the latest work and policy research on zero youth detention.

I have learned that since the passage of the County-wide levy in 2012, a consensus has grown among juvenile justice experts that incarceration is harmful and counterproductive. Incarceration decreases the chances of high school completion, increases risk of recidivism, and is associated with worse physical and mental health outcomes for youth. Due to the racial disproportionality that exists in the youth detention center, these injuries are concentrated in the Black community.

The evidence points to systemic and structural issues that must be addressed if we are to create a community where young people can thrive, particularly for Black youth who have been negatively impacted by the systems and institutions that were put in place long before our time. Together, we must do more of the work that is necessary to address needs upstream – including increased investments in programs that address the education, economic, and health needs of young people. Together, we must increase diversion programming and community-based interventions so that young people can avoid incarceration altogether. And together, we must address the disproportionality in law enforcement that continues to persist. I readily acknowledge that we have work to do at the City level to address a range of disproportionate impacts on outcomes for youth of color. And I know that you share my urgency to advance new and innovative initiatives that will be data-driven and focused on results.

The City has much more work it can and must do. Data shows that the King County Youth Detention Center's admissions are disproportionate – minority youth are admitted at much higher rates than non-minority youth. With the guidance of a Federal District Court, the United States Department of Justice, and community partners, the Seattle Police Department continues striving towards bias-free policing. And the Seattle Police Department is now partnering with the DOJ and Dr. Jack McDevitt, Associate Dean for Research at Northeastern University and Director of the Institute on Race and Justice, to explore possible causes for disparities observed across law enforcement metrics and, critically, how SPD's advancing data may lead to knowledge and innovation in this important area.

Under our Zero Use of Detention for Youth resolution passed in 2015, the City committed to establishing a path forward to eliminate the City's reliance on detention. I would offer the City's Criminal Justice Equity Team tasked with supporting this work as an additional resource for King County to collaborate with and identify where we can better integrate our shared objectives on this topic. Recognizing connected systems and shared investments, this is an opportunity for us to continue to strengthen our partnership as we strive to reach this goal.

While I recognize that an immediate transition to zero youth incarceration is unrealistic, I have some concerns about the current plans for the detention facility given our joint goals of working toward zero detention. The landscape of research on best practices and intervention strategies points to mounting evidence against incarcerating young people that was not known at the time this facility was being planned. This new evidence, the continued decline of incarcerated youth in our community, and the need for considering public concerns all point toward reexamining aspects of this facility.

My request is for King County to consider a second look at the facility design and to convene a table for dialogue among various interests and perspectives to explore whether there are practical options or modifications to consider that will better create the kind of environment needed to meet the needs of those young people who become engaged in our criminal justice system. In addition to a multi-disciplinary team of experts that can inform best practices not just from a judicial and law enforcement perspective, but that of clinical and trauma-informed expertise, I believe that the communities who are most impacted must also have a seat at the table as the future of this facility is discussed.

Additionally, my office would be happy to work with your office to reach out to national experts on this topic to tap into additional technical advice or guidance that might be helpful for the County to utilize in any such reexamination. For example, as you are likely aware, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has conducted cutting-edge research on the topic of juvenile justice reform and juvenile detention alternatives. They may be able to provide technical assistance from a more objective third-party vantage point that could be helpful as we navigate a topic that is often fraught with high stakes and high emotions. I would be happy to take advantage of relationships staff in my administration have with the Foundation and other local and national experts to explore this possibility.

I hope you will take my request under consideration and look forward to our continued partnerships toward realizing a future system of zero detention – one that is safer, more humane, and more just for everyone in our community.

Sincerely,

Edward B. Murray
Mayor of Seattle

There's a lot in this letter—and, certainly, a lot more to come on this topic for Murray as he runs for re-election this year.

This evening, King County Executive Dow Constantine issued a statement about the proposed Children and Family Justice Center, in which he called for "peacemaking circles" between advocates for the new facility and anti-youth jail activists. [Read his statement here.](#)