

California's SB 823 Less Restrictive Programs: A Continuum of Care for Adolescent Rehabilitation

Technical Assistance Brief

Less Restrictive Programs (LRPs) create pathways for youth committed to the Secure Youth Treatment Facility (SYTF) to transition back into the community with support that emphasizes accountability, positive youth development, and healing. LRPs are designed to recognize a young person's ability to grow and change, ensuring that they receive the support and services needed to thrive while remaining connected to their families and communities, with appropriate supervision and support from probation officers, the court, and service providers along that pathway. This approach is supported by research and data and results in safer communities.¹

Background: From Incarceration to Community-Based Solutions

California's closure of the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) represented a fundamental shift away from incarceration of youth. Research consistently demonstrates that community-based alternatives produce better outcomes for youth while enhancing public safety.² LRPs embody this evidence-based approach by creating structured pathways for youth to transition back to their communities with appropriate support and supervision.

LRPs address a critical gap in traditional youth justice approaches, which typically lack intermediate options between secure confinement and full community release. Research shows that gradual, supported transitions back to the community, based on specific individualized needs, produce better outcomes for youth while maintaining public safety.³ Historically, the youth justice system in California did not have many options for graduated transition between being incarcerated in locked facilities and stepping down to community

¹ <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/OYCR-UCLA-Stepping-Home-Elements-Less-Restrictive-Programs.pdf>

² <https://www.ylc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Calling-Out-the-Harms-of-Incarceration-Handout.pdf>

³ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2023/06/Effective-Alternatives-to-Youth-Incarceration.pdf>

living. This is changing as the state recognizes that successful reintegration requires decreasing levels of restriction and increasing community connections.

Guiding Law: WIC 875(f)

To petition the court ordering an SYTF youth transition from a SYTF to an LRP, the youth's attorney, or the probation department, may bring the following motion at a Six-Month Review Hearing or at any other time during the youth's Baseline Confinement Term (BCT), pursuant to **Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) Section 875(f)**:

***(f)(1)** Upon a motion from the probation department or the ward, the court may order that the ward be transferred from a secure youth treatment facility to less restrictive program, such as a halfway house, a camp or ranch, or a community residential or nonresidential service program. The purpose of a less restrictive program is to facilitate the safe and successful reintegration of the ward into the community. The court shall consider the transfer request at the next scheduled treatment review hearing or at a separately scheduled hearing. The court shall consider the recommendations of the probation department on the proposed change in placement. Approval of the request for a less restrictive program shall be made only upon the court's determination that the ward has made substantial progress toward the goals of the individual rehabilitation plan described in subdivision (d) and that placement is consistent with the goals of youth rehabilitation and community safety. In making its determination, the court shall consider both of the following factors:*

***(A)** The ward's overall progress in relation to the rehabilitation plan during the period of confinement in a secure youth treatment facility.*

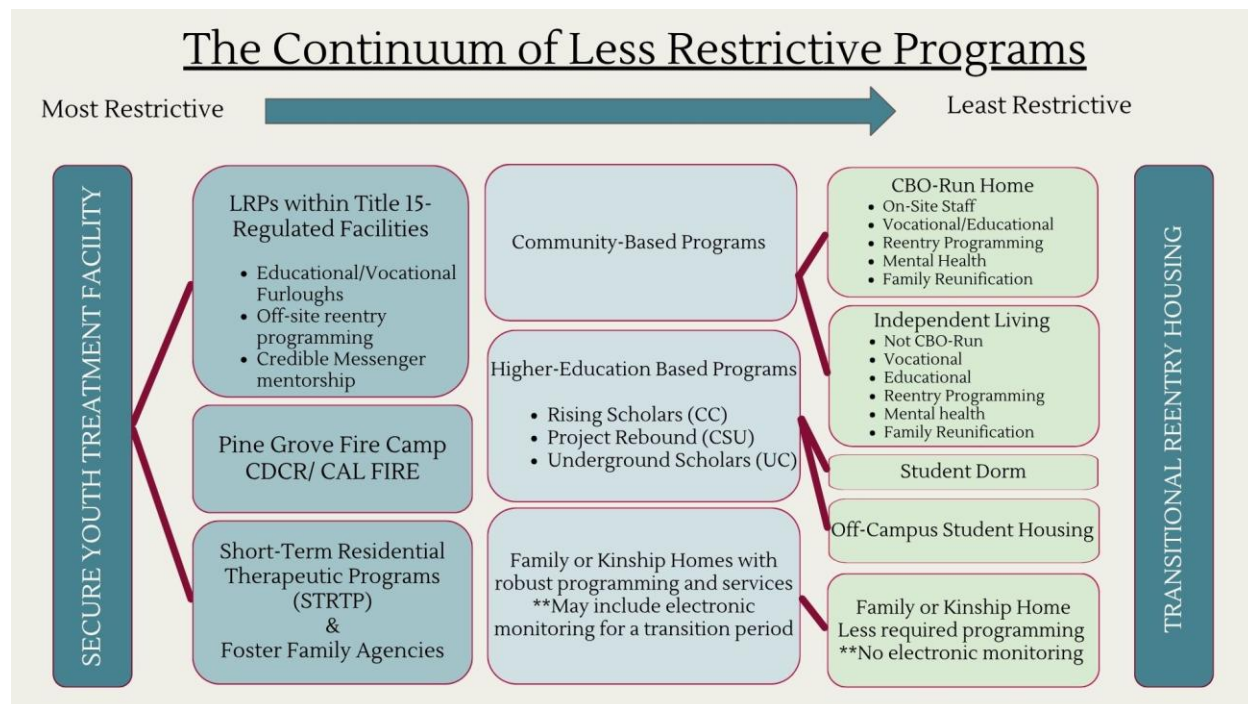
***(B)** The programming and community transition services to be provided, or coordinated by the less restrictive program, including, but not limited to, any educational, vocational, counseling, housing, or other services made available through the program.*

Under California court rules, youth can receive baseline confinement terms ranging from 1-7 years depending on their offense.⁴ However, courts must review youth progress every six months and may reduce the baseline term by up to six months at each hearing. Importantly, the law requires courts to consider '*the availability of programs and services in the community to which the youth may be transitioned from secure commitment to less restrictive alternatives*' - making LRPs a key factor in these regular reviews. It is important

⁴ https://courts.ca.gov/cms/rules/index/five/rule5_807

to note that courts may consider LRP transfers at any of these regular six-month review points, clearly indicating that the statute requires LRP consideration as part of the continuum of the youth's ongoing placement at these review hearings.

In describing LRPs, the statute allows for individualized approaches and flexibility in supporting SYTF youth across the continuum of care. The law emphasizes that LRPs are not necessarily specific physical placements but can be a weaving of individually tailored programming in a variety of settings that promote healthy adolescent development through treatment, healing, and rehabilitation. Courts are required to consider the youth's progress and the support available in the community before authorizing movement into less restrictive settings, ensuring that each transition advances both youth growth and community safety.



The Continuum of Less Restrictive Programs

Less Restrictive Programs exist along a continuum, moving from incarceration and more structured placements to community-based environments. Each step provides increasing autonomy for the youth and greater connection to community, based on individualized needs, while maintaining services, oversight, and support. Credible messengers are

formerly incarcerated or system-impacted mentors and are central to supporting youth through all settings along the LRP continuum.⁵

Youth ordered to a SYTF begin their BCT in these county-operated secure facilities. SYTFs are designed to serve youth who would previously have been sent to the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). While incarcerated in an SYTF, a young person's programming and services must reflect what is outlined in their Individualized Rehabilitation Plan (IRP). The decision to move a youth into an LRP is largely based on their progress towards their IRP goals, as well as whether they have exhausted the rehabilitative programming available in the SYTF. Although the youth's attorney or probation can request an LRP transfer through a WIC 875(f) motion to the court, the judge makes the final decision about whether to order the LRP transfer and determines what type of LRP is appropriate.

Any setting or program, other than an SYTF facility, can be considered an LRP.

Youth in LRPs are under probation supervision with services and supports, regardless of where they are living. LRPs need not be a specific place or location, but include individualized rehabilitative programming based on each youth's IRP goals and needs. Below are examples of successful LRP approaches that counties have implemented. The list is not exhaustive but is meant to illustrate the *possible* LRP continuum. Youth need not follow each step described below and may step down into any of these approaches directly from the SYTF.

1. LRPs Within Title 15 Facilities⁶:

An LRP can operate within a Title 15-regulated juvenile facility in a County, such as a ranch or camp, if youth are provided with greater freedom and opportunities than the general population. This model can serve as a bridge for youth who are not yet deemed ready for full community placement, but who benefit from increased opportunities, support, and preparation for eventual reentry. It is important to note that LRPs operating in the same building as the SYTF—even if they are categorized as separate facilities for regulatory purposes—may not adequately serve the core purpose of community reintegration. True reintegration requires gradual transition into actual community settings, not simply movement between programs housed within the same institution.

⁵ https://www.chhs.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/OYCR_Stepping-Home-Elements-%E2%80%93-Credible-Messengers.pdf

⁶ <https://www.bscc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Title-15-Adult-Full-Regulation-Text-2025-Effective-4.1.2025.pdf>

In this setting, youth may:

- Receive day furloughs to attend higher education, vocational training, or employment;
- Participate in off-site reentry programming;
- Work closely with Credible Messengers inside the facility or through partner community-based organizations; and
- Receive any additional services as deemed appropriate by the court while in the LRP setting within a Title 15 regulated facility.

2. Community Care Licensed Facilities:

- **Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs):** STRTPs are licensed by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to serve youth who need intensive therapeutic support in a structured, home-like environment. As part of the LRP continuum, STRTPs can provide an appropriate step down from an SYTF for youth who are ready for a less restrictive setting but still require clinically based services. STRTPs combine 24-hour care and supervision with individualized treatment, including treatment related to education, and behavioral health services, with the goal of helping youth rehabilitate, stabilize and prepare for eventual return to family, kin, or community-based housing.
- **Foster Family Agencies (FFAs):** FFAs are licensed by the California Department of Social Services (DSS) to recruit, certify, and support foster families who provide care for children and youth. Within the LRP continuum, FFAs can serve as a less restrictive placement option for youth stepping down from an SYTF. Youth placed through FFAs live in family-based settings, where they receive supervision, stability, and individualized support. FFAs also connect youth and foster families to behavioral health services, education, and community resources, helping youth prepare for long-term reunification with family, kin, or transition into independent living.

3. Pine Grove Fire Camp:

Pine Grove Fire Camp, operated by CDCR in partnership with CAL FIRE, offers an LRP for youth 18 and over, where youth live and train as wildland firefighters, gaining skills in forestry, teamwork, and leadership. In addition to education and certifications, youth contribute to community safety while preparing for future employment.

4. Community-Based Residential Programs:

- Homes in the community operated by community-based organizations (CBOs).
- Provide staff-secure, supervised and highly structured, home-like environments with staff support and case management.
- Services may include reentry programming, trauma-informed care, mental health and wellness services, family reunification, education, vocational opportunities, employment support, and Credible Messenger mentorship.

5. Independent Living with Reentry Supports and Services:

- Non-CBO run home or apartment
- No on-site staff or supervision
- Supportive services in the community, such as reentry programming, trauma-informed care, mental health and wellness services, family reunification, education, vocational opportunities, employment support, and Credible Messenger mentorship.

6. Higher Education-Based Programs:

- Youth may live in on-campus dorms or off-campus student housing while enrolled in college.
- Programs like Rising Scholars, Project Rebound, or Underground Scholars provide a unique academic Credible Messenger community of other formerly incarcerated or system-impacted students on campus who offer retention services and academic support.
- Youth access an array of on-campus services, such as behavioral health services and mentorship while pursuing degrees or vocational certificates.

7. Family or Kinship Homes:

- Youth may return home or live with trusted loved ones, sometimes with electronic supervision, such as ankle monitoring, during a transition period where appropriate.
- Services may include CBO partnerships to offer continued reentry and life skills support, family therapy, reunification support, and behavioral health care.
- CBOs partner with families to ensure stability and continued mentorship.
- Credible Messengers can also support reentry in this setting.

Important Note on LRP Designation-

The statute envisions LRPs as a range of options, and generally there is no special license, certification, or designation requirement to operate as an LRP when serving youth 18 years of age and older. WIC §875(f) references a broad spectrum of LRPs, and youth may be ordered to any appropriate residential program, community-based organization, or supportive living arrangement as an LRP. Youth who are 18 and older in LRP status may be placed alongside peers who are not on LRP status, which helps promote reintegration and reduce stigma.

Youth who are under 18 may be placed in STRTPs or FFAs—as noted above—alongside youth who are not on LRP status. However, this population may not be housed in an unlicensed, community-based LRP while under 18.

Counties may choose to establish contracts or MOUs with community-based organizations operating LRPs if required for local budgetary, operational, or administrative purposes, but such agreements are not required by statute.

Transitional Reentry Housing:

For youth who are nearing the end of their BCT, or who have completed their BCT and placed on reentry probation, and cannot safely or realistically return home, transitional housing may be needed. This type of housing may be provided through probation-contracted properties or community-based organizations, with financial and supportive services. Youth residing in transitional housing are often employed and/or enrolled in higher education or vocational programs. In this setting, youth are not constantly supervised but have access to Credible Messengers and other reentry support.

LRPs Are Tailored to Meet the Individual Needs of Youth

Across all layers of the continuum, LRPs prioritize supportive programming to meet a young person's specific needs. Programs address trauma, behavioral health needs, and reentry challenges, and may include:

- Trauma-informed behavioral health care
- Substance use treatment when appropriate
- Life skills development
- Education and job training
- Credible messenger mentorship
- Family therapy and reunification services

When youth struggle in LPRs, the focus should be on providing additional support, addressing barriers, and supporting successes in the placement, rather than viewing it as a program or placement failure.

Conclusion

Research underscores the long-term harms of youth incarceration. Adolescents often experience compounded trauma that incarceration worsens. Less restrictive, community-based alternatives offer better outcomes by fostering healing, accountability, and long-term success. LPRs allow youth to gradually reintegrate, aligned with adolescent development and individualized treatment plans. By centering Credible Messengers, families, and community-based organizations, LPRs create pathways for youth to heal, grow, and build futures beyond system involvement.

Additional Information

OYCR maintains a current inventory of LPRs across the state. To request this list, or for additional information or technical assistance related to LPRs, please contact:

OYCR@chhs.ca.gov or 916-651-0423.