

To the Juvenile Justice Working Group,

The Juvenile Justice Coalition of Ohio is writing to express both our support of the recent preliminary recommendations made by the working group and our hopes that thoughtful intentionality be used to implement those recommendations in the most expedient and fruitful way. We strongly endorse a move towards smaller facilities and initiating an unbiased professional review as suggested by the taskforce, as well as other suggestions for improvement that we will elucidate below. The Department of Youth Services' mission is to "improve Ohio's future by habilitating youth and empowering families and communities." Children in overpopulated and understaffed facilities bear the weight of systematic dysfunction; being separated from families, communities, and support systems while incurring more damage from a broken system only ensures that their harmful behaviors will continue and often increase during and after incarceration. That cycle leads to increased recidivism and lower levels of educational attainment. If public safety is the goal, Ohio's current strategy of dealing with youth offenders is not the way forward. With 43.2% of children released from DYS custody returning to youth prison or entering the adult prison system,¹ DYS' mission is clearly not being fulfilled.

Smaller Facilities

The process of creating smaller community-based carceral facilities would be a significant step forward for Ohio's youth and therefore for the safety and stability of all Ohio. Large, prison-like facilities that mimic adult facilities are ideal for punishment but antithetical to true rehabilitation for individual traumatized children in need of healing. Currently, DYS cannot accommodate the basic court-ordered needs of the children it seeks to rehabilitate. There is not enough behavioral or mental health staff to fulfill court-required services in a timeframe that honors the unique developmental realities of adolescents. If we cannot provide what the judge insists a child needs to return safely to their communities, why are we putting them into these facilities to incur more trauma without receiving the help, tools, or interventions that will ensure public safety upon their return home?

Governor Mike DeWine recently voiced support to shift to more holistic solutions, saying: "I think it's the right thing to do. It's important for the safety of the juveniles, I think it's important for the safety of the staff. I think we'll be better able to deliver services to these juveniles in a smaller setting." Not only will smaller facilities allow for more individualized services, they will enable staff to create real relationships with youth which lead to a more positive and safe environment for youth and for staff. We've heard members of the workgroup, including Chair Stickrath, repeat the refrain, "Smaller is better." We urge you to keep the reasons smaller facilities are more effective in the forefront.

¹ ODYS Recidivism Fact Sheet-
<https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/dys.ohio.gov/About%20DYS/Communications/Reports/Recidivism%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

- Smaller facilities allow for significant and individualized care and treatment of youth.
- Smaller community-based facilities get to better utilize the strength and resources of the child's home community instead of isolating them from those support systems.
- Community based treatments can better involve and equip the families of children; a proven key ingredient in youth rehabilitation.
- Smaller facilities with more responsible youth to staff ratios encourage better relationships and communication between these parties. Better relationships and communication strategies directly lead to less use of force, less traumatization, and better outcomes.

It is important to keep these benefits in mind, because some suggestions made during the working group meetings would be a step backwards in terms of community-based care. An example is the suggestion to rebuild several smaller facilities on the plots of land that currently house the three JCFs. This would give us smaller facilities with none of the benefits of smaller facilities. The buildings would likely share staff, negating the advantages of having small communities of staff and youth who can build trusting relationships. They would be no more immersed in the communities than at present, negating the benefits of stronger wrap-around services or use of community resources. We must prioritize changes that will increase better outcomes for both staff and youth.

Legislators earmarked \$118 million for the replacement of the Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility (CHJCF). CHJCF staff and youth enjoy significantly less isolation time, less staff on youth physical force and OC spray deployments, less youth on staff and youth on youth violence, and better staff retention than any other prison in the system primarily due to its open dormitory style setting. In many ways CHJCF is a model to replicate throughout the state, not a first priority to terminate. That money would be better allocated towards replacing a more problematic facility within the system to provide the benefits outlined above.

[Comprehensive Review of DYS](#)

An unbiased professional review of the current DYS system is required if we want to have a full understanding of the strengths and especially weaknesses inhibiting rehabilitation. In order to address the problems within DYS, we have to first identify and understand them. A comprehensive and unbiased review is the logical solution.

[Additional Recommendations](#)

Investing in ways to strengthen our juvenile justice system through DYS is a responsible and worthwhile task, but data shows us clearly (through recidivism, school dropout, and other markers) that we should be doing everything we can to prevent the removal of a young person from their home and community in the first place. We must look at the alternatives to DYS and local prevention efforts that would meet the needs of these youth before they are remanded to DYS' custody.

Reduce JCF Population

1. Make choices about intake based on available resources at the JCF's. When youth are committed to DYS while there isn't enough staff to support the influx, everyone suffers. Other states have taken serious steps to prevent this egregious error, including Texas' recent decision to temporarily halt intake of youth into the state-run facilities². They realized that "an inability to even provide basic supervision for youth locked in their rooms" made utilizing community alternatives the only responsible solution. If proper and safe staffing does not exist, children should not enter the facilities.
2. Release youth who only remain in DYS custody to complete treatment that DYS hasn't been able to administer. These youth should have a plan to complete this treatment with local providers instead of incurring further harm in a system that cannot provide the treatment they are mandated to complete.
3. Utilize Alternative Placements. DYS already operates several smaller facilities that have better staff:youth ratios and service provision to help ensure positive outcomes. These are the facilities we should utilize, fund, expand, and replicate. There is also a significant amount of money designated for the use of Community Correctional Facilities (CCFs) which are fully funded, underutilized, and should be used to reduce prison population and provide specialized care in a least restrictive environment for emotional and developmental growth. Restructure CCFs to better meet the full continuum of needs and end the practice of injudicious admittance policy.
4. Invest in locally run juvenile detention centers (JDCs) to incentivize best practice standards. These facilities are already in the local communities and generally serve a smaller local population. If they were trained and equipped to utilize the same practices that make smaller carceral facilities valuable, we could limit the pipeline from these facilities to DYS facilities. Getting parents, educators, and wrap-around services to the table to discuss a child's care and safety plan as well as reentry plan would be a significant step toward limiting further involvement with the justice system.

I truly appreciate how much time and effort has gone into better understanding the current issues facing DYS and the youth in their care. Change begins with humanizing these children rather than treating their lives and their trajectories as disposable and inconsequential. Their crimes do not negate their humanity or worth. These are children who have every potential to become adults that add value to their families and communities. They deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. The Juvenile Justice Coalition supports comprehensive justice system reform that leads away from "out of sight, out of mind" thinking and toward true rehabilitation and life-long betterment for our youth.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

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