

Ohio Department of Youth Services
Testimony on HB 166
Senate General Government and Agency Review Committee
May 14, 2019

Chairman Schuring, Vice-Chair Rulli, Ranking Member O'Brien, and members of the General Government and Agency Review Committee, my name is Ryan Gies and I am Director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS). I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today in support of Governor DeWine's budget for fiscal years 2020-2021. This budget wholeheartedly supports DHS in its mission to improve Ohio's future by habilitating youth and empowering families and communities. This budget allows the Department to continue support for highly successful researched-based community programming and provide enhanced educational and vocational opportunities for the youth in our facilities. In short, this budget allows the Department to sustain juvenile justice progress in Ohio, support public safety, and meet the complex needs of some of the most challenged youth in Ohio.

As you may be aware, DHS is the state component of Ohio's juvenile justice system. It is statutorily mandated to confine felony offenders, ages 10 to 21, who have been adjudicated and committed by one of Ohio's 88 county juvenile courts. Several decades ago, I would have told you that was our agency's narrow focus. While that purpose remains a core function of our agency, we have become much more. We are no longer just the youth corrections agency for the State of Ohio; we support a wide range of community resources to not only divert appropriate felony level youth from DHS, but also improve the chances of success for justice-involved youth at every level in the juvenile justice system.

In recent years, we have learned a great deal about adolescent brain development and what contributes to delinquent behavior. This knowledge has enabled us to come up with strategic approaches for addressing the root causes of this behavior. Each youth has unique needs that call for different approaches and different environments to help him or her become a successful, law-abiding citizen.

DYS Juvenile Correctional Facilities

The majority of our population is between the ages of 16 and 17; nearly half of our male population and 100% of our female population have a mental health diagnosis. Furthermore, almost 50% of our students are receiving special education services.

These attributes, combined with an average facility length of stay of approximately 13 months, present significant challenges.

DYS has three state-operated juvenile correctional facilities located in Circleville, Massillon, and Highland Hills. We also use four alternative placement facilities. Staff are committed to providing a challenging population with everything they need to become self-sufficient and productive. Our facilities are accredited by the American Correctional Association and provide a variety of services and treatment for youth, including a fully-accredited high school, behavioral health services, family engagement, medical and dental care, recreation, religious services, community service opportunities, victim awareness, and reentry services.

In Ohio, we have struck a nationally-recognized balance between community options and state incarceration -- where we previously had more than 2,000 (2,177 average daily population in FY '01) youth in DYS custody and more than 13,000 felony youth (13,194 in FY '98) passing through courts, we now have fewer than 520 youth in state custody and fewer than 4,200 youth were adjudicated as felons in Ohio last year.

This significant decrease in the facility population has been driven by strategic community funding initiatives and has in turn allowed the Department to reinvest dollars previously spent on facility operations into highly successful community programs. Through a true partnership between the Department and county juvenile courts, we have been able to change the landscape of juvenile justice in Ohio, serving more youth in the community and raising the bar with research-supported practices.

DYS strives to positively impact the lives of youth who require treatment and programming in a deeper end juvenile correctional facility. However, the vast majority of youth can be effectively served in a community setting, which research indicates is more effective.

Community Programs

DYS has invested in an array of complementary community initiatives to reach youth, support families, and build communities. Whenever possible, youth who are at lower risk to reoffend are served with appropriate treatment closer to their families and communities. Evaluation results have shown that youth have a drastic decrease in reoffending if they are allowed to remain close to home and their family support system. To provide youth with this opportunity, the Department funds local communities through interwoven initiatives including RECLAIM Ohio, the Youth Services Grant, Targeted and Competitive RECLAIM, Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ), and 12 state-funded Community Corrections Facilities (CCFs). Community alternatives range from services to divert at-risk youth from court involvement to interventions that divert felony youth from DYS commitment.

Much of the success in transforming juvenile justice is attributable to RECLAIM and its research-based expansions. Through these investments, communities have been equipped with the resources to develop a continuum of options for addressing juvenile

offending. We know that having and using a range of options is effective in reducing future crime. In fact, a 2014 study conducted by the University of Cincinnati that examined just over 10,000 youth who had come in contact with the juvenile justice system concluded that RECLAIM programming is an extremely cost effective commitment option, which takes into account the low rate of recidivism of RECLAIM programs. Ultimately, the study found that for every dollar spent on RECLAIM, the state saved between 13 and 57 dollars compared to incarceration.

Governor DeWine has made it clear that providing opportunity for every Ohio kid is a priority. The youth that come before juvenile court judges often bring with them more than just their delinquent or unruly behaviors. They reside with unstable or fractured families. They live with the impact of traumatic experiences. They are way behind in school. They suffer from mental health and substance abuse disorders. In some cases, all of the above. This necessitates targeted resources that address the root problems in addition to holding youth accountable for their actions. Investing in community programs can help ensure that underlying needs are met at the earliest possible point in a youth's life.

With this budget, we want to give youth in Ohio's communities the opportunity to overcome their challenges by equipping them and their families with what they need to be self-sufficient. Mental health and substance abuse treatment, wraparound services, and other family supports are all tools that will help our youth prepare to be independent, law-abiding adults.

This budget will not only preserve what has worked well in Ohio juvenile justice; it will provide an investment in the long-term future of children. It will give youth and families the chance to succeed by providing the community programs they need to get on a healthy and crime-free path. It will bolster the ability of our county partners to take care of justice issues in their own communities whenever possible. It will ensure that local community corrections facilities have the ability to recruit and maintain the quality staff needed to effectively work with felony youth, and it will provide for a small expansion of needed mental health residential treatment beds for girls in DYS custody.

Education and Vocational Training

Unlike the adult system, virtually all of our youth will return home to the community prior to or on their 21st birthdays, and we need to prepare them with tools such as education, life skills, and job training in order to help them be successful upon release. DYS has its own school district within our facilities, and we are fully accredited by the Ohio Department of Education.

We evaluate each youth's educational background at intake to determine the most appropriate educational programming. Many youth are suited for a career technical track, and we offer programs that help students obtain entry-level job certificates in industries such as food service, building trades, horticulture, and information technology-related fields. In fiscal year 2018, career technical students completed 525

career competencies and earned industry recognized credentials and skill certificates. We also offer a total of five formal apprenticeship opportunities for youth to prepare for employment as cooks, groundskeepers, maintenance workers, janitors, and recovery (recycling) operators. Additionally, DYS provides a variety of post-secondary transitional opportunities for youth who are on both college and vocational tracks.

Among others, we currently have partnerships with Stark State Community College, Cuyahoga Valley Career Center and Pickaway-Ross Career and Technology Center to prepare youth for steady work after they leave our facilities. In addition, we are collaborating with community colleges across the state to expand vocational programs designed to ensure youth are job-ready when they go home. We are prioritizing training that can be completed at DYS, or be finished in the community, for youth to gain industry-recognized credentials for in-demand job opportunities.

Conclusion

The proposed funding in this budget allows DYS to focus on habilitating youth, empowering families and communities and promoting public safety. Under this budget, DYS will continue moving forward with system-wide reforms that have transformed DYS into a model for other states. The Governor's proposed executive budget supports helping these young people change their lives as we invest in a safer Ohio.

I would like to thank the many groups who have been supportive of our initiatives and who partner with us to give youth everything they need to succeed. We appreciate the open and honest dialogue with these partners, which include family members of youth, OCSEA/AFSCME, SEIU/1199, OEA, the juvenile courts, community partners, volunteers, and other stakeholders.

Chairman Schuring and members of the committee, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to testify today in support of the Governor's proposed budget. My staff and I are available to answer any questions you may have at this time.