



Ohio Department of Youth Services  
Testimony on House Bill 33  
House Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety  
March 15, 2023

Chairman Kevin Miller, Ranking Member Adam Miller, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety, my name is Amy Ast and I am the Director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS). Thank you for the opportunity to present Governor DeWine's proposed budget for FY 24-25.

As you know, DHS is Ohio's juvenile correctional agency. We care for the youth adjudicated to our custody by the 88 county juvenile courts, most of whom are housed in our three juvenile correctional facilities. Additionally, we allocate a significant amount of funding in juvenile court subsidies to fund evidence-based community programming. We also fund 11 community corrections facilities to give juvenile courts more options of determining the best placement for treating youth while also holding them accountable for their actions. We contract with private providers to serve specialized populations.

I came back to DHS in January 2022 after spending four years in the private sector. Prior to that, I spent 21 years at this agency. I began my journey in 1996 as a juvenile corrections officer and in time, was promoted to facility superintendent and later led reform efforts in Central Office.

Returning to DHS, just over a year ago, felt like coming home and I made it clear to our agency leadership team that we would lead DHS with clear direction, following our "True North." Our True North spells out our mission, our vision, our values, and our guiding principles. All of it is aimed at this fundamental purpose – transforming and saving young lives and creating a safer Ohio.

From the moment I first spoke with Governor DeWine about serving in this role, one thing was very clear to me: he values Ohio's children, families, and communities. By investing in them, this budget seeks to create a safer Ohio and give each youth the opportunity to reach their full potential.

### ***Staffing***

Just like other correctional agencies across the nation, DHS is currently facing a serious challenge with recruitment and retention of staff. Our staff are the most valuable resource for habilitating the youth in our care. It takes a special type of public servant to work at DHS. From our direct-care facility staff, to parole officers, to Central Office staff, they show

up every day to work in often difficult conditions with the highest-needs youth in Ohio. I could not be more grateful for their on-going commitment.

The difficulty in maintaining staffing levels could not have happened at a more crucial time for our agency. DYS has seen a dramatic increase in the number of youth being sent to DYS facilities. From December 2020 to October 2022, we saw our average daily population grow from 360 to 521 youth. That's a 44% increase. Youth population has come down slightly since October, with an average of 488 youth in January 2023, but this still exceeds the pre-pandemic population numbers.

Although numbers show there is not a huge increase in the count of youth being adjudicated by juvenile courts on a felony, there is an increase in proportion of very serious offenses. 56% of youth at DYS have been committed on gun specifications that come with mandatory sentences. Two of our three facilities are near full capacity, while the third is becoming increasingly high-risk as youth there reside in a dormitory setting rather than in individual rooms.

Staffing issues can become a vicious cycle in correctional facilities. When staffing levels start to drop, existing staff often have to work mandatory overtime, which can lead to burnout and cause further retention issues. This affects the ability to deliver effective programming to youth and can jeopardize safety and security.

Our leadership team and HR department have put countless hours into identifying solutions for these recruitment and retention challenges. So far in FY23, we have increased salaries for juvenile corrections officers and approved supplemental pay for teachers, social workers and behavioral health staff. We have created new employee mentoring programs, New Employee Support Teams (NEST), and taken new approaches to sharing job postings through social media, billboards, and created recruitment videos. We also have staff building relationships with colleges and universities in an effort to recruit new employees.

To keep up with competition from private and public sector employers, this budget supports continued supplemental pay increases for teachers, behavioral health staff, and social workers through FY 24 pursuant to collective bargaining agreements. This budget supports increased pay rates for juvenile correctional officers and we are also increasing the total number of juvenile correctional officer positions to ensure safety of youth and staff due to our higher facility populations.

### ***Programming for DYS Youth***

The youth currently in DYS custody have some of the most complex needs in our agency's history.

- 67% of male youth are on the mental health caseload.
- 100% of female youth are on the mental health caseload.

- 56% of youth have been committed on a gun specification offense.
- 47% of youth are in need of special education.

Governor DeWine is committed to addressing mental health issues, particularly for children. Most youth that courts commit to DYS have a dual-diagnosis of substance and behavioral health disorders. Further, they also come to us having experienced significant trauma in their lives and are in need of trauma-informed treatment. This budget will create a multisystemic therapy trauma team to work with youth in our facilities and their families on the outside. This will ensure that mental health treatment is available to our youth and will equip them with the tools needed to be successful upon returning to the community.

The high percentage of youth committed to DYS on gun crime specifications translates to longer sentences. The average age of youth in DYS custody is 17.7 years old. For this older demographic, it is important that DYS provides vocational education opportunities for youth. In FY 22, youth at DYS earned 184 industry credentials, such as ServSafe, OSHA, and forklift certifications. In addition, youth at DYS earned 1,983 skill certificates including financial literacy, seed starting certification, zero turn mower certification, and landscape management. We are also proud to share youth were awarded 35 high school diplomas and 34 GEDs in FY 22, and our graduates earned 207 college credits through our partnership with Sinclair Community College and Stark State College. We are working on finalizing partnerships with local career tech centers, like the Cuyahoga County Career Center, which provides programs such as HVAC to qualified youth. In this budget we plan to advance the use of virtual reality in our career tech programs and create four new vocational education teacher positions to increase capacity in training our youth in fields such as construction trades, horticulture, and auto tech. This will help youth remain engaged in education for the duration of their time at DYS and prepare them to enter the workforce upon returning home. We are also investing in secure email to allow youth to send resumes and communicate with prospective employers.

Our agency recently created a new Office of Reentry and Community Engagement, which begins planning for the youth's return to his or her community immediately upon admission to DYS. Their current work includes "Renounce/Denounce" which is a gang intervention program that connects individuals with lived experience to mentorship opportunities with our youth. Our reentry team has also worked to have our Ohio Means Jobs ONE Stops certified as national job centers. The certification will be effective later this month and will enable our ONE Stops to be eligible for federal resources and grant dollars. In addition to programs that cultivate hard and soft employment skills, this budget will enable us to engage youth through a trauma-informed lens by implementing PEACELove programming at DYS facilities. This curriculum will improve the emotional health and well-being of participants through the arts, visual, dance, and music.

Additionally, our budget allocates \$200,000 per fiscal year towards a new program for youth transitioning out of DYS custody at age 21. Senate Bill 288 of the 134<sup>th</sup> General Assembly authorized DYS to develop this program which will help youth in finding housing, transportation, employment, and education.

## ***Supporting Communities***

Youth are less likely to reoffend when they are treated closer to their homes and their family support system. It is important for Ohio's county juvenile courts to have options to treat low and moderate risk youth who are better suited for community alternatives than incarceration. DYS plays a pivotal role in Ohio's juvenile justice system by supporting community programs for youth across the state.

Perhaps the most well-known initiative is RECLAIM Ohio, which provides subsidies to juvenile courts to develop services for low-level offenders or youth who are at-risk of ending up in the juvenile justice system. More than 20,000 youth in Ohio benefited from programming funded by RECLAIM in FY 2022. Courts reported in FY 22 that 82% of youth who participated in a DYS funded community program completed it successfully. While DYS facilities represent the deepest end of the juvenile justice system, RECLAIM can help with early intervention to prevent at-risk youth from ending up in juvenile courts.

This budget continues the \$2 million appropriation increase for RECLAIM county subsidies that was implemented in 2022, the first increase since 2006. This funding will help the county juvenile courts that participate in RECLAIM to cope with higher costs of programming. Through the Competitive RECLAIM process, DYS created a new grant category in FY 23 for violence prevention, encouraging courts and local county agencies to create innovative approaches to further reduce violent crime.

This budget will continue to fund the Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice Initiative (BHJJ), which is jointly funded by DYS and OMHAS to provide evidence-based programs to identify and divert youth with mental health and substance disorders into community-based treatment. In addition to BHJJ, county subsidies for our Youth Services Grant, which can be used for treatment, intervention, and diversion programs, will also be continued. In addition to DYS-led initiatives, we also collaborate with other child serving agencies to govern the OhioRISE model which provides high quality behavioral health services and care coordination for Medicaid eligible youth up to age 21.

## ***Community Corrections Facilities and Alternative Placements***

In addition to community programs, DYS also funds 11 community corrections facilities (CCFs). These locally-operated facilities provide juvenile courts with an alternative placement for youth adjudicated for a felony offense. CCFs create a smaller environment for treating youth who might not be suited for a larger DYS facility while still providing a secure setting. This budget provides \$3.4 million in additional funding to help them keep up with operating costs.

DYS contracts with private facilities for youth better suited for treatment in an alternative setting. The largest of these is the Lighthouse Youth Center at Paint Creek, which houses boys and offers cognitive behavioral therapy and an on-campus independent living

program. This budget will provide \$2.4 million in each fiscal year to expand bed capacity at Paint Creek and provide these high-needs youth with the behavioral treatment needed to prepare them to return to the community.

Additionally, DYS contracts with the Montgomery County Center for Adolescent Services (CAS). This facility houses all girls committed to DYS, all of which are on the mental health caseload. CAS provides cognitive behavioral therapy and other structured programming. This budget will provide a \$1.1 million increase per year for cost-of-living adjustments for all CCFs, plus local wage match for Montgomery County to maintain staffing levels.

### ***Safety in Communities and Facilities***

When I returned to DYS last year, the agency was facing a challenge with youth on parole disengaging with their parole officers, what we call “whereabouts unknown” youth. This is a serious concern not only for public safety but for the safety of these youth who could find themselves in trouble without proper parole supervision. This budget will create the Community Intervention and Intelligence Unit (CIU) within our Parole Bureau. This specialized unit will consist of five parole staff with arrest authority and firearm endorsement aligning with existing authority in the Revised Code. The CIU will be tasked with preventing youth from going whereabouts unknown and locating and reengaging youth before they can harm others or become victims of violence. This unit will work more closely with local law enforcement and provide intensive supervision on high-risk cases.

This budget will also enable us to implement security upgrades at our facilities. It includes continued funding of newly deployed body-worn cameras. We began rolling out body-worn cameras last fall through an ARPA grant awarded by the Office of Criminal Justice Services. We implemented the use of the cameras after experiencing a spike in youth violence in our facilities. Along with the cameras, we have also equipped select facility staff with Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) spray. OC spray has resulted in fewer staff and youth injuries than physical restraints. OC spray does not replace verbal de-escalation strategies and we will not abandon other tools such as building healthy relationships, but it does give our staff another tool to address violent situations. The body-worn cameras have been particularly useful in providing transparency and assessing acts of violence and use of force when determining how we can continue to improve safety.

Early evidence indicates these tools are working. In September 2022, DYS experienced 116 acts of violence committed by youth. DYS introduced these new security tools in October 2022 with full implementation in January 2023. In February, there were 72 acts of violence. That’s a reduction of nearly 38% and approximately 90% of youth in our three facilities did not engage in any acts violence against their peers or our staff. Additionally, the Correctional Institution Inspection Committee has conducted inspections at all three DYS facilities. Their staff reported that their recent inspection of our Indian River JCF was one of the best ever conducted.

## ***Innovative Practices***

In order for DYS to be an innovator in the field of juvenile justice, we need experts to continuously monitor the latest research and stay up-to-date with best practices. For this reason, this budget will create a Best Practices Institute within DYS. This office will be charged with analyzing areas within the agency for quality improvement, conducting research for solving challenges, and maintaining resources needed to advise executive staff in decision making.

DYS is also leveraging technology to better serve youth and communities. This budget will help us develop a subsidy grant database that will more efficiently process, visualize, and enhance the impact of state funding flowing to counties. Community subsidies make up a significant portion of our agency's budget. This database will help us determine the most effective programs for preventing juvenile crime and ensure that Ohio taxpayers get the most bang for the buck. In short, this DYS subsidy database will help us prove what is working and why it works.

After participating in ride-alongs with parole officers, it became clear to me there are opportunities to reexamine how we supervise youth on parole and equip officers with additional tools and technology to strengthen engagement. This budget invests in a mobile application that will help officers provide feedback in real time, more actively participate in the treatment planning process, and significantly increase our capacity to monitor the educational and vocational activities associated with recidivism reduction.

## ***Conclusion***

At DYS, our mission is vitally important to the safety and future of our state. Our cause is just, which is reflected in the following statements that guide and motivate our work every day:

- Every youth will have an opportunity to achieve their full potential, and
- What we invest in is what we value.

This budget is an investment, and it shows that we value our youth, our staff, our families, and Ohio's communities. I wholeheartedly support this budget and I am confident it will improve public safety and give youth an opportunity to transform their lives. Chairman Miller and members of the committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am available to answer questions you may have.