

Senate Finance Committee

May 30, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Finance Committee for your time and thoughtful consideration as we discuss House Bill 33. My name is TaKasha Smith, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Juvenile Justice Coalition. This is the 30th anniversary for JJC, which exists to educate the public, organize individuals, families, and communities, and influence policy all in the name of creating a more equitable, and a more restorative juvenile justice system. That is 30 years of volunteers, organizers, community members, families, and youth asking more of the system than we currently receive. Asking to be valued and considered worthy of care and protection no matter their skin color, the school they attended, or the neighborhood they live in.

I am proud to fight for every child's right to be protected and cared for before, during, and after their interactions with the justice system. Our families, our communities, and our state need our children to be successful. We need all our children to be successful. We need them to thrive, learn, grow, and mature into adults who will be well, healthy, and ready to lead the next generation. Youth incarceration, in the traditional sense, is a hindrance, not a precursor, to that growth.

Juvenile incarceration is a high-cost policy with a low return on investment. In fiscal year 2022, Ohio spent \$235,841 to incarcerate a child for one year. The average length of stay in DYS facilities is currently 16.4 months. That is a total incarceration cost of \$322,316 per child. This amount has increased significantly in recent years. In 2018 the per diem average cost (which includes food, clothing, medical care, and treatment costs) per child was about \$535 compared to 2022's \$805- an increase of 34%. This money can and should be invested more effectively. While also being costly, incarceration inflicts bodily harm on youth, is rife with racial disparities, restricts opportunities for youth to become well-educated and financially stable, and often leads to recidivism. Robust upstream investment in Ohio's children can prevent their involvement in the juvenile justice system not just mitigate it's ill effects. Ohio should shift spending away from youth confinement and towards local and community alternatives with robust data collection that ensures programs treat the root causes of the issues that lead to justice involvement. Not just deliver punishment after the offense.

Around the country, there are alternative models of youth justice that are adaptable to local contexts in Ohio – these models are focused on developing partnerships and continuums with community members, community organizations and non-profits, which are more cost-effective and better positioned to serve justice-involved youth, particularly Black youth and other youth of color. This is important because Black youth currently make up 63% of the DYS population, even though they account for about 15% of all youth in Ohio. Along with shifting towards a community-engaged and led approach, we should move funds to our existing alternative programs.

Thankfully, DYS already invests in a number of upstream programs targeted to reach children before they cross the threshold into a DYS facility primarily through Targeted RECLAIM, Competitive RECLAIM, and the Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice Initiative (BHJJ). These are performance- driven, evidence-based programs that help to divert youth from institutions and help communities serve the right youth in the right environment with the right treatment. They allow families to participate more fully in treatment since the children participate in effective community-based alternatives instead of being committed to a facility that could be hundreds of miles away from home. Though the Governor's proposed budget includes an almost 20% increase of RECLAIM funds- none of that increase is allocated to these 3 crucial program streams.

This is important when you look at the cost/outcome benefits of these programs. DYS has shown that Targeted RECLAIM is an “integral part of Ohio's community continuum for serving youth” and that it has greatly reduced DYS

population since 2009ⁱ. Youth served by Targeted RECLAIM have been less likely to reoffend compared to those experiencing incarceration. Youth served by BHJJ programs have seen improvements in trauma symptoms, substance abuse, and school performanceⁱⁱ. Between 2017 and 2019, 81% of youth in the diversion program successfully completed the program and 79% of youth reduced their contact with police while in treatment. These initiatives still serve high-need children while costing a fraction of the cost of incarceration in an Ohio youth prison and could therefore serve more youth who are currently in confinement. The state's cost for one child to complete the BHJJ program was about \$5,200. In FY 2022, a year of incarceration for one child could finance 45 children's BHJJ program costs.

Another example of how these dollars could be used in community programming is to support much needed partnerships to reduce juvenile gun violence and gun possession. We need to fund and support partnerships between residents, law enforcement, community entities, and the juvenile justice system. A major catalyst for the increased number of kids in DYS (and their longer sentences) is gun specification charges. Knowing that, a responsible use of our funds (that will actually improve public safety) is to fund and implement evidence-based reduction strategies in targeted areas throughout our state.

Aside from the three juvenile prisons in Ohio, children are held in eleven Community Corrections Facilities (CCFs) and three alternative placement facilities. In fiscal year 2022 there was a daily average of 431 youth held in youth prisons, 180 in CCFs, but only 52 in alternative placements. Today there are 62 children in 3 alternative placements designed to be safe and supportive environments to meet kids' unique needs and provide the treatment and services they need to be rehabilitated and become productive adult members of society. I offer that by nature all children would better thrive under this kind of rehabilitative care. HB 33 does propose a budget increase to grow the number of beds at Lighthouse Youth Center at Paint Creek from 48 beds to 60 beds. We wholeheartedly support that expansion and ask you to consider what more of the requested allocation could do to benefit our youth who need it most. Alternative placements are not the best-case scenario for a select few kids. Smaller community-based placements in their own communities are the best-case scenario for almost every child. Increased support and interaction with their families can make all the difference for a child. Similarly, easier re-entry to their communities and schools can make the difference between successful re-entry and increased isolation.

Finally, I know this committee has heard many testimonies about the workforce shortage and the lack of qualified workers willing to take public service and difficult direct-care jobs. I'd like to beat that drum and add that this issue is very real in our community-based programs as well. The need to provide a living and competitive wage to these workers is as critical as it is to boost staff within the walls of DYS. I applaud the planned budget increase to Community Correctional Facilities including increases for salaries and benefits. Expanding the amount of RECLAIM dollars that are going directly to other outcome proven community programs could be the difference between suitable staffing that will allow children to rehabilitate outside of juvenile prisons and the life long, collateral consequences of spending a year and a half of one's childhood within them.

Our state is at a critical junction in how we treat juvenile justice. Over the past 15 years, Ohio has reduced its youth prison population as the state has shifted to prioritizing more successful investments and decreased its reliance on punishment. However, DYS still spends millions more on youth prisons than it does on its most effective diversion programs, including Targeted RECLAIM, Competitive RECLAIM, and the BHJJ initiative. With the current increase in DYS commitments and the potential increase in the DYS budget, I worry that we are going to move backwards toward a system that pours money into prisons and neglects the programs we know not only hold youth accountable for their mistakes, but can successfully help them make better choices in the future. I strongly urge the Senate Finance Committee to consider an amendment that would stipulate the percentage of increase to the Community Program line of the budget mimic the increase to the RECLAIM line

of the biennial DYS budget. Time and research have proven how effective these programs are. Ohio’s budget should reflect this.

Our recommendations are to:

- Reduce reliance on youth confinement, which ultimately doesn’t increase community safety, and use the savings to expand alternative programs. We should expand demonstrably positive efforts within DYS’s Targeted RECLAIM, Competitive RECLAIM, and Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice initiative, as well as adapt and adopt effective models from across the country. Funding should be flexible to foster partnerships and continuums with community members and non-profits.
- Alternatives to incarceration should be accompanied by robust data collection, evaluation, and oversight to ensure state dollars are being spent justly and effectively on trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches rather than on the harsh or traumatizing conditions of juvenile confinement.

I sincerely thank you for your time, attention, and consideration. I’d be happy to answer any questions.

Department of Youth Services					
<i>Current Population (DYS facilities and alternative facilities – all active status youth)</i>					
By Current Location		By Race		By Gender	
Currently Assigned Facility Name	Current Population	Race	Current Population	Gender	Current Population
Applewood Centers	2	White	123	Male	464
Center for Adolescent Services	20	Black	314		
Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility	122	Hispanic	19		
Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility	124	Mixed-Race	16		
Hocking Valley Community Residential Center	2	American Indian	2	Female	30
Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility	165	Pacific Islander	1		
LightHouse Youth Center - Paint Creek	40	Other	16		
Lucas County Youth Treatment Center	1		1	Grand Total	494
Miami Valley Juvenile Rehabilitation Center	2	Asian	2		
Multi County Juvenile Attention System	3	Grand Total	494		
North Central Ohio Rehabilitation Center	1				
Oakview Juvenile Residential Center	1				
Oesterlen	10				
Perry / Multi-County Juvenile Facility	1				
Grand Total	494				

Population May 26, 2023

ⁱ [RECLAIM | Department of Youth Services \(ohio.gov\)](https://www.reclaimohio.gov/)

ⁱⁱ [Statewide and County BHJJ Evaluation Reports 2019.pdf \(case.edu\)](https://www.case.edu/research/behavioral-health-juvenile-justice/)