



**Ohio Department of Youth Services
Testimony on House Bill 96
House Public Safety Committee
February 25, 2025**

Good morning Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the House Public Safety Committee. 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 26-27.

DYS is the state agency for Ohio's juvenile justice continuum. We care for youth between ages 10 to 21 committed to our custody by Ohio's 88 county juvenile courts. We have three state-operated juvenile correctional facilities in Circleville, Highland Hills, and Massillon. We fund 11 locally-operated community corrections facilities which provides judges options for treating youth in a localized setting. Additionally, we invest millions of dollars in subsidies to counties to fund evidence-based community programming to habilitate low and medium risk youth closer to home.

Staffing in Juvenile Correctional Facilities (JCFs)

Staffing and retention have been a main area of focus for our agency in recent years. Staffing costs make up about 45% of our total budget. It is especially important today because our population at DHS is increasing. In December 2020, we had a total of 360 youth at our JCFs. As of January 2025, that number was 487. That is an increase of 35% in four years. Our population is up about 15% since I last testified during the previous biennial budget process.

I'd be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to thank our staff who work with youth 24/7, 365 days a year. I am truly grateful for their work. Our agency is tasked with treating the highest needs, highest-risk, and hardest to reach youth in the state of Ohio. Approximately 73% of our male youth are on the mental health caseload and 100% of our girls are on the mental health caseload. 46% of them require special education. These youth cannot reach their fullest potential without our dedicated staff.

Juvenile justice agencies across the country are facing a national staffing crisis and Ohio is not immune to this. According to a report titled "Systems in Crisis" from the Council of State Governments (in partnership with the University of Cincinnati and Georgetown University), almost 90% of agencies reported moderate-to-severe challenges with hiring and retention among front-line staff. It reported vacancy rates as high as 30-40% in some areas.



To improve safety and staff retention, our staff are now equipped with new security tools. All front-line staff are equipped with body cameras and designated staff now carry Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) spray. We have increased scenario-based training at our academy to better prepare staff to manage dysregulated youth. We have also trained staff in verbal de-escalation techniques for responding to youth in crisis. But we still have more work to do, and we intend to continue this momentum.

We have made financial investments in staff to recruit in a challenging labor market. Staff in hard-to-fill positions have received pay increases and are offered supplemental pay and additional incentive pay to cover weekend shifts. These investments have helped reduce our vacancy rate for correctional officers, which went from 24% in January 2024 to 15% in the final week of January 2025. Teachers have gone from 24% to 14% in the same time period. Behavioral Health Services (BHS) staff stayed the same at 35%. Total vacancies in January 2024 were 18%, as of January 2025 they were at 13%. Funding in this budget will help DYS continue these efforts to make sure the state can compete with the private sector in a competitive job market.

Education

This request supports the strengthening of Ohio's families and youth by providing them with the resources they need to succeed, such as Education. DYS operates a fully accredited school district and each of our three JCFs has its own high school.

Our educators have two goals for the 2024-2025 school year:

- Ensuring learners have access to a curriculum that emphasizes growth in both literacy and math that utilizes the science of reading.
- Implementing our "Portrait of a Graduate" plan that focuses on making every student future ready, having social and emotional wellness, becoming a leader, exhibiting self-motivation, being a skilled communicator, demonstrating a sense of service to their community, and exuding adaptability.

In the 2023-2024 school year, 53 youth earned their high school diploma, and 35 youth earned their GED. These are the highest totals in over a decade. Additionally, youth earned 1,307 skills certificates and 187 industry credentials. With recent graduations, I am pleased to share that nearly 1 in 4 youth in our JCFs are now a high school graduate or GED completer. While this is a great accomplishment, it presents a new challenge for our staff. How do we keep young people at DYS engaged in meaningful work when so many of them have already finished high school?



This has led us to look towards developing a new initiative called BUILD (Buckeye United Industry & Leadership Development program) for our graduates and GED completers. BUILD combines advanced technology and staff instruction to train our graduates in emotional regulation, soft skills for the workplace, problem solving, and more. BUILD leverages Ohio Means Jobs centers, virtual reality career exploration, and Google Workspace to pursue in-demand credentials. We will also soon be applying for BUILD to become a “state-recognized pre-apprenticeship program” through the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services to create more training and employment opportunities for youth.

We know that education is a key predictor of success for young people once they return home. Supporting their academic growth and development will reduce recidivism and create safer communities. We respectfully request support of this budget so we can continue to operate our school district while we also develop innovative programs to prepare graduates for the workforce.

Investment in Communities

The most effective way to tackle delinquent behavior is to stop it before it begins. Community programming is an effective tool to intervene with youth either before they enter the justice system or soon after. This is why DYS helps juvenile courts fund alternatives through an initiative called RECLAIM Ohio.

These alternatives can come in the form of intensive probation, treatment, counseling, and mentorship programs. Although no county is required to participate in RECLAIM, for those that do, RECLAIM subsidy grants provide juvenile court judges with supplemental funding to create a local menu of interventions that utilizes evidence-informed approaches and positive youth development to promote public safety. In FY 2024, there were 83,484 RECLAIM program admissions. Eighty-one percent of youth enrolled in a RECLAIM funded program did not recidivate in the following 12 months, preventing them from falling deeper into the juvenile justice system. Multiple counties across the state are also using RECLAIM dollars to fund resource and assessment centers. Examples of resources provided include referral to mental and behavioral health services, basic needs such as access to food, laundry service, education, and other individualized needs.

Another program continued in this budget is the Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice Initiative (BHJJ), which is jointly funded by DYS and OMHAS, and provides evidence-based programs to identify and divert youth with mental health and substance disorders into community-based treatment. DYS also administers the Youth Services Grant to all 88 counties to support juvenile courts with treatment and early intervention programs.



There are two primary ways that DYS makes sure that taxpayer dollars are spent on effective interventions. First, DYS staff monitors county expenditures and evaluates the effectiveness of these programs. I am grateful for funding from the General Assembly in the previous biennial budget to develop a subsidy database to further track successful completion and outcomes to better serve Ohio families. This database is tentatively scheduled to go live later this year. Second, RECLAIM goes through a third-party evaluation every 10 years and we are currently in that 10 year evaluation period.

Community Correctional Facilities (CCFs) and Alternative Placements

In addition to community programs through RECLAIM, DYS also funds 11 community corrections facilities (CCFs). Despite being funded through DYS, CCFs are locally-operated. Their purpose is to provide juvenile judges with an alternative option for youth adjudicated for a felony offense. CCFs create a smaller environment for serving lower-risk youth who have shorter stays and need targeted treatment. The key is getting the right youth into the right environment to receive the right services. This request includes funding for additional staff at CCFs and cost of living adjustments to help them remain competitive in the labor market while also protecting the safety and well-being of youth.

Some youth require highly specialized treatment. DYS contracts with Buckeye Ranch and the Montgomery County Center for Adolescent Services (CAS) to house girls committed to DYS, 100% of whom are on the mental health caseload. These facilities provide cognitive behavioral therapy and other structured programming. There are approximately 30 DYS girls in total currently housed at these facilities.

System Transformation

As you all know, Governor DeWine has made success of children a focus of his administration. In early 2024, Governor DeWine tasked former Director of DYS and Department of Public Safety, Tom Stickrath, to lead the "Juvenile Justice Working Group" and examine Ohio's juvenile justice system at the state and local levels. In September 2024, 26 recommendations for improving state and local practices were issued. This budget focuses on two of those recommendations. First, there is funding to assist local juvenile detention centers with obtaining certification under the Prison Rape Elimination Act and accreditation from the American Correctional Association. These efforts will provide standardized guidance on conditions of confinement in local detention centers. Second, there was a recommendation to add a CCF in each of the three highest committing counties, and funding was approved in the most recent capital budget to construct the first of these. We are requesting funding to support the operation of the additional CCF once the location has been finalized.



Conclusion

At DYS, one of our “Just Cause” statements is “What we invest in is what we value.” This budget is an investment, and it shows that we value our staff, our youth, our families, and Ohio’s communities. I respectfully ask for your support of this budget because I am confident it will improve public safety and give youth an opportunity to transform their lives. Chair Abrams and members of the committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am now happy to answer any questions.