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March 5, 2025

To: House Public Safety Committee
From: Sasha Naiman, Executive Director, Children's Law Center
Re: Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 96

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the House Public Safety Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present on HB 96. I ask you to invest in the proposed budget for our Department of Youth Services (DYS) and, more broadly, to support policies that hold youth accountable in developmentally-appropriate, evidence-based ways.

I am Sasha Naiman, the Executive Director of Children's Law Center, Inc. (CLC). Established in 1989, CLC is a public interest law firm that helps young people grow up in safe and healthy ways. CLC is committed to protecting children's rights and improving the education systems, justice systems, child welfare systems, and other legal systems that serve our youngest, most vulnerable community members. Last year, CLC provided community education reaching over 2,000 people in our region. Our team also provided free, high-quality direct legal assistance directly for over 400 youth—children with disabilities seeking special-education support, child victims of crime, young people in child-welfare systems, homeless teenagers, youth hoping to remove barriers to career pathways, and youth who are in the justice system.

The stories of the youth CLC serves have taught me that: children deserve to have legal systems that help them grow up in safe, healthy ways; legal systems that match accountability with understanding of childhood brain development; justice-system-based consequences that provide for children's wellbeing and help them improve their behaviors and decision-making; systems that don't treat children like adults; systems that never throw children away. Children deserve our investment. They are worth it.

That is why I urge you, through this year's proposed DYS budget and beyond this budget, to invest in our youngest, most vulnerable community members. Relatedly, I urge you to support the recommendations from the Governor's Juvenile Justice Working Group. You can *safely* prevent youth from engaging in delinquent behaviors and going deeper into our juvenile and criminal justice systems.

As you vote on the proposed DYS budget, I ask that you consider the following three opportunities.

1. **Shifting away from large, institutional incarceration settings to safer, more effective regional facilities and community-based alternatives.**

First and foremost, I want to highlight the importance of shifting from large, institutional incarceration settings to safer, more-effective regional facilities and community-based alternatives. Research shows that, in order to achieve the best outcomes for youth and general public safety, we need to use community-based, empirically-supported intervention practices as an alternative to traditional incarceration wherever possible. Local, therapeutic, community-based interventions in lieu of youth prison can: ensure effective upstream investment in youth, like cost-effective therapy programs; help right-size the problematic youth-to-staff ratio in the youth prisons; and reduce likelihood of reoffending.

Specifically, CLC supports funding **additional community correctional facilities (CCFs)** in the three counties with the highest DYS commitments. With proper oversight, CCFs can create an outstanding option for lower-risk youth and those who need targeted treatment, rather than sending them to youth prisons. Investment in CCFs is especially important given the challenges that our youth prisons are currently facing—from ensuring appropriate staffing, to meeting wide-ranging health/safety/education needs of youth, and beyond. Compared to youth prisons, CCFs generally have smaller groups of youth, more services, greater focus on rehabilitation and preparation for their release, opportunities for specialized treatment programs, and lower recidivism rates. They also tend to have lower lengths of stay for youth—which can translate to lower strain on staffing and costs. Under Director Ast’s leadership, more youths have been directly linked with CCFs which are better suited to meet each youth’s unique needs and are, hopefully, closer to home, family, and networks that will support youths’ reentry. Of note, CCFs reduce the dangerously-high youth prisons population in two ways: juvenile judges can send felony-adjudicated youth to CCFs instead of the traditional youth-prison settings, and also, youth who are in DYS’s correctional facilities can sometimes be stepped-down to a CCF.

Additionally, CLC supports DYS’s goal of creating **smaller, more specialized youth-serving facilities instead of its current large juvenile corrections facilities (JCFs)**. Smaller facilities with more-specialized staff have several proven benefits. For example, staff and youth report feeling less stressed, safer, and more respected. Since there are fewer youth, staff are more likely to know names of and build positive connections with youth, in ways to improve rehabilitation—and conversely, there is less chance for large groups of youth to create the violence/disruption issues we have sometimes seen at DYS. Staff can also more easily see youths’ interactions with each other and with adults who work, volunteer, or visit in the facility, as there is less crowding.

Whether at CCFs, new JCFs, or otherwise, investment in smaller, local community-based facilities has another huge benefit, which research suggests can increase public safety: youth stay connected to positive family/community members and, also, access supplemental services from local providers. This increases their likelihood for positive reintegration following their release. For example, youth can maintain psychologically-crucial relationships with parents, siblings, faith leaders, and others. Youth can sometimes stay connected to medical or other service providers who they trust and who already know the youth well or, at the DYS facility, a youth could access services from local organizations that seamlessly



continue after the youth's release—like mentoring, vocational programs, and re-entry services. In general, smaller, local community-based facilities are better situated to connect with these helpful local resources and community members, which is a programmatic advantage often missing from large congregate-care facilities. When youth have uninterrupted support networks that seamlessly extend into or out of the correctional facility, research shows there is reduced recidivism and increased re-entry success.

1) Ensuring appropriate staffing, specialization, and programs for youth in the Juvenile Correctional Facilities (JCFs or youth prisons).

CLC recognizes the need to allocate funds that ensure proper, high-quality staffing in the JCFs. Indeed, a well-trained, adequately staffed, and supported workforce ensures that the youth committed to DYS facilities are provided with programming, education, court-mandated treatment, recreation, and other services critical to their health, safety, wellbeing, and rehabilitation. In 2024, DYS has made some strides in recruiting and retaining staff to serve youth, and CLC supports funding that would allow DYS to continue safe, rehabilitative settings, education, health services, etc. At the same time, to ensure that this part of the budget stabilizes, it is also important to reduce the number of youth in the JCFs and to increase youths' opportunities for quality placements in community programs, CCFs, and other locally-run alternatives to youth prison.

2) Tailoring developmentally-appropriate and trauma-responsive solutions.

As repeatedly noted in the Governor's Juvenile Justice Working Group Report and in alignment with modern medical and social science research: youth in our juvenile justice system require developmentally-appropriate and trauma-responsive solutions. The human brain, particularly our prefrontal cortex, is developing through adolescence and into our 20s. Research continues to show that juvenile justice systems work best when systems are tailored to the particular needs of young people (e.g., therapeutic, family connectivity, education support, jobs skills, etc.). Moreover, justice-system-involved youth in Ohio and nationwide have significant histories of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and other trauma, especially after the massive destabilization caused by the COVID pandemic. CLC supports funding DYS as it aims to transform its facilities, culture, and programs—to provide the trauma-informed, developmentally-appropriate interventions that achieve rehabilitation, youths' personal growth, and safety.

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Accountability means rehabilitation—not added trauma. If we aim to hold youth accountable, we must help them understand when they cause harm, ways to repair that harm when possible, and skills to make better choices in the future. Accountability means kids are not repeating past mistakes or negative behaviors, and they become healthy, positive members of our society. I believe the proposed DYS budget can create more accountability instead of more trauma.

With that said, I have personally seen many youth heal and have accountability without DYS—in community-based alternatives that we should also support. I am thrilled when courts can successfully divert youth into community-based treatment, for example. I also understand that DYS plays a role in our state, and that is why I am here supporting the proposed budget.



If we are serious about public safety, we have to invest in kids right now—from all angles. I hope you will agree that we need investments in the three opportunities I highlighted: safer, more effective local facilities; appropriate staffing, specialization, and programs at DYS; and justice-system solutions that are developmentally-appropriate and trauma-responsive.

Thank you for your consideration and for allowing me to testify about the impacts of the proposed DYS budget. I am happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully,

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