

Ohio Department of Youth Services

Testimony on Operating Budget

House Finance Committee

February 11, 2021

Chairman Oelslager, Vice-Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and members of the House Finance Committee, my name is Ryan Gies and I am the 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 2022-2023.

A biennial budget bill is more than line items and numbers. At the core, it is a statement about goals, priorities, and strategies for helping the citizens of Ohio. For DHS, this budget prioritizes effective research-based community programming, while also supporting rehabilitative treatment and reentry services for youth committed to our juvenile correctional facilities (JCFs).

Many people know DHS as 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.

However, juvenile justice and the issues that lead to delinquent behavior are both broader and deeper than our mandates. In the past few decades, DHS has evolved from being a youth corrections agency to a full partner in supporting juvenile justice throughout the state. We realized we needed to be more agile and creative in developing innovative solutions. That is why we invest in a continuum of community programs to not only divert appropriate felony level youth from DHS, but to also improve the chances of success for justice-involved youth at every point in the system.

At DHS, the vision of our agency is a safer Ohio: one youth, one family, and one community at a time. The proposed funding in this budget continues the work toward that vision, equipping us to help meet the justice needs of youth both in communities and within state care, giving young people the best chance for success while also holding them accountable for their actions and protecting the safety of the public.

***DYS Facility Operations***

DYS operates three JCFs, located in Circleville, Massillon, and Highland Hills. We also use four alternative placement facilities. Our facilities are accredited by the American Correctional Association and provide a variety of services and treatment for youth. We aim to touch on every aspect needed to help our youth be successful upon returning to the community. This includes maintaining three fully-accredited high schools, behavioral health services, family engagement opportunities, medical and dental care,

recreation, religious services, community service opportunities, victim awareness training, and reentry services.

Sixty-five percent of our male population have mental health needs that require targeted services. These youth are placed on our mental health caseload. One hundred percent of our female population are on the mental health caseload due to their mental health diagnoses. Furthermore, 44 percent of our students receive special education services. These facts, combined with an average facility length of stay of approximately 17 months, present significant challenges.

Ohio is recognized as a national model for its balance between community options and state incarceration. We have roughly 360 youth in state custody and a total of roughly 3,100 youth were adjudicated as felons in Ohio's juvenile courts in FY '20. We have come a long way from the late 1990s/early 2000s, when Ohio had more than 2,000 youth in state custody and more than 13,000 youth adjudicated as felons. This reduction in facility population allows us to focus on the highest risk and highest needs youth in our JCFs, those who need the most attention and treatment to be successfully habilitated.

The decrease in the facility population has only been possible through strategic community funding initiatives. This has allowed us to invest dollars previously spent on facility operations into highly successful community programs instead.

It is our commitment to positively impact the lives of youth who require treatment and programming in a juvenile correctional facility, which is the most secure option within Ohio's juvenile justice system. However, the vast majority of youth who come in contact with juvenile court can be effectively served in a community setting, which research indicates is more effective.

### ***Community Programs and Initiatives***

Among the innovative solutions I mentioned earlier are the community initiatives that DYS has developed and invested in over the last several decades. This is the best way 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 can remain close to home and their family support system. We want to make sure youth can access juvenile court services in their own communities, reserving DYS commitment for those youth who are unsuited for or are unable to take advantage of options in the community.

To provide youth with this opportunity, DYS funds local communities through initiatives including RECLAIM Ohio, the Youth Services Grant, Targeted and Competitive RECLAIM, Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ), and state-funded Community Corrections Facilities (CCFs). The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) has also helped change the way communities intervene early when youth get in trouble, with more Ohio counties joining each year. Community alternatives range from

services to divert at-risk youth from court involvement to interventions that serve youth in lieu of DYS commitment.

The solution to juvenile crime is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Just as every child in Ohio is different, we know that having and using a range of options is effective in reducing future crime. 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 delinquency.

We are learning from what has worked well in Ohio's juvenile justice system. 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.

### ***Education, Vocational Training, and Programming***

From the moment a youth enters a facility, our staff are already working on a reentry plan to help him or her be successful upon returning home. Perhaps the most important factors for building that foundation are education, life skills, and job training. To meet that need, DYS has the Buckeye United School District, which operates high schools in our three JCFs and is 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 pursue their high school diploma or GED. Some youth are better suited for a career technical track. The youth in our facilities are on average older than in the past, so we have been focusing on improving post-secondary and vocational opportunities.

Two years ago, I stood before this committee and spoke about new partnerships with community colleges across the state to prepare youth for steady work after they leave our facilities. I am happy to report that these efforts to expand vocational programs have moved forward despite the challenges the last year has brought us. Many of our youth thrive with hands-on learning opportunities and these programs have been very popular with our youth. We have prioritized training that can be completed at DYS, or be finished in the community, in order for youth to gain industry-recognized credentials for in-demand job opportunities such as welding.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our staff accelerated a process of equipping our school district with remote learning capabilities. This platform was instrumental to our youth and educators while our facilities were on restricted movement and youth were unable to physically attend school in a classroom setting. Our youth have returned to classroom learning, albeit in a modified way similar to what is happening throughout Ohio, but remote learning will continue to be a part of the toolbox that the teachers at

DYS have for making sure our youth are able to achieve their educational goals and be successful upon reentry.

In addition to hybrid schooling, our staff have found other ways to make sure that youth remain active and engaged throughout the COVID-19 experience. Keeping youth safe does not mean they must be idle. Strategies such as unit cohorting and flexible treatment options have been useful. We also found great success in virtual visitation, which is something we plan to keep once in-person visitation resumes, in order continue to enhance connections between youth and their family support system. Additionally, health and safety measures that youth are learning in the facilities will be part of the reality they encounter in the communities they will be reentering.

### ***Conclusion***

Before concluding, I would like to recognize our staff at DYS. The juvenile justice field can be challenging even under normal circumstances. Our staff have faced the challenges posed by COVID-19 and have gone above and beyond in working to keep the youth in our facilities and on parole as safe as possible. Congregate settings are more susceptible than others to the spread of viruses, but our staff have worked very hard to keep facilities clean, while following proper protocols regarding PPE and social distancing. They are our frontline heroes, and I am proud of them. As our agency continues to grapple with the threat of COVID-19, this budget provides DYS with the funding needed to properly respond. Costs include providing a sufficient supply of PPE for all facilities and parole, cleaning equipment and supplies, increased staff costs, and more.

Under this budget, DYS will continue pushing forward with system-wide reforms that have transformed DYS into a model for other states, while helping young people change their lives as we invest in a safer Ohio.

Chairman Oelslager and members of the Finance Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today in support of the Governor's proposed budget. I am available to answer any questions you may have at this time.