

Ohio Department of Youth Services
Testimony on House Bill 110
Senate General Government Budget Committee
April 28, 2021

Chairman Schaffer, Vice-Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Senate General Government Budget 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).

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.

Success Stories

When I spoke with Chairman Schaffer a few weeks ago, he suggested that we tell the stories of youth who have been successful upon release. I appreciate that invitation, because I never shy away from the opportunity to commend youth who have been able to turn their lives around. Our juvenile parole officers (JPOs) have shared with us the following stories of two youth currently on parole:

One youth, whom I will call "Youth F" to keep him anonymous, is on parole and is working full-time with a security company. He has not missed any parole visits and stays in regular contact with his JPO. Youth F is working towards obtaining his high school diploma with the aspiration to go to college. He hopes to work with at-risk youth in the future.

Another youth on parole, whom I will call "Youth M", is scheduled to receive his high school diploma this spring. He has held a full-time job with a logistics company since January and is participating in their fork-lift training program. Youth M meets regularly

with his outpatient mental health treatment provider and has not missed any JPO visits. This is all while his mother is battling serious illness. His JPO told us: "It's an impressive juggling act for a person of any age, but to be a first-hand witness to his grit and determination has been incredible."

Not all stories turn out like these, but the ones that do give us confidence that the treatment and reentry plans we are developing for youth can increase the chances for leading successful, law-abiding lives when they return to the community.

I have been fortunate to meet with each of you individually before this hearing, so I will keep the remainder of my testimony brief and simply touch on a few points of our facility operations and community initiatives.

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.
- The Buckeye United School District operates three fully-accredited high schools within our juvenile correctional facilities. Our educators strive to meet the learning needs of youth who are often behind in school when they come to DYS. It is critical that our youth have the opportunity to earn a high school diploma or GED.
- DYS has also made vocational training a priority. Our youth population is on average older than in the past and we believe youth will be much more likely to succeed if they are job ready upon reentry. DYS has created partnerships with community colleges in Ohio for youth to earn associate's degrees and industry-recognized credentials for in-demand career fields such as welding and HVAC.
- Sixty-five percent of our male population and one-hundred percent of our female youth have mental health needs that require targeted treatment. DYS mental health and behavioral health staff work diligently to help youth achieve better outcomes with those needs.
- Additional programming such as victim awareness, family engagement, religious services, recreation, and reentry planning are also key to our operation.
- 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

- As I have shared with each of you, Ohio has achieved a nationally-recognized balance between community programming and facility operations through decades of investment into community alternatives. Over the years, we have learned a great deal about addressing delinquent behavior locally.
- Youth often see better outcomes in reoffending when they are treated closer to their homes and their family support system. We want to make sure that Ohio's county juvenile courts have options to treat those low-risk youth who are suited for community alternatives to incarceration.
- This budget continues to support RECLAIM Ohio and the other funding initiatives and system reforms that have reduced both felony offending in Ohio and the population at the Department.
- Since the late 1990s, the number of youth adjudicated for felony offenses by county juvenile courts has dropped from more than 13,000 to approximately 3,100 in FY 2020; that's a decrease of more than 75%. The decrease in DYS population from more than 2,000 in the late 1990s to less than 390 today has afforded us the opportunity to work with the high-risk youth who really need to be with us.

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.

At DYS, 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.

Chairman Schaffer and members of the 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.