



Reforming Connecticut's Juvenile Justice System

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Connecticut has invested heavily, and come to regret its “investments,” in an adult-like, institution-based youth corrections system that costs far more money (and produces worse results) than even the most intensive community-based interventions. The Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS) costs close to \$500,000 per bed/per year to operate, given the low number of youth confined at the facility (115-125 youth in 2006, far below capacity) and its otherwise high costs. It is also well accepted that this facility is not meeting the needs of the troubled boys held there. In fact, for most delinquent children, confinement in secure facilities is not effective in preventing future crime or rehabilitating offenders. Juvenile justice experts at the University of Chicago note that “Violent youth are a major focus of the juvenile justice system, but serious and violent crimes account for fewer than 10 percent of all delinquent offenders.” In Connecticut, youth convicted of the most serious crimes are not even *in* the juvenile system; transfer statutes place them in adult corrections.

Connecticut should replace CJTS with small, community-based programs that are more home-like and accessible to families. State officials have directed that the prison-like facility be closed in the next several years and replaced with smaller, community-based residential treatment centers (estimated to cost roughly \$45,000 annually per youth). It is essential that the state maintain *only* the number of secure beds that are necessary to serve Connecticut's small population of violent and chronic juvenile offenders, and try to adapt available space in existing residential facilities to make secure units (instead of building new facilities), wherever possible. In identifying sites, proximity to public transit is critical.

Connecticut should return juvenile court jurisdiction to include all 16 and 17 year olds. In the 2005 Session, Connecticut expanded Youthful Offender status to include more youth, and in the 2006 Session provided funding to plan for an expansion of juvenile jurisdiction in delinquency cases to include *all* 16 and 17 year olds. Both are essential, and overdue, steps in reform of our system. Connecticut continues to have youth this age in the adult criminal justice system. All other states, except two, understand that youth this age are not as psychologically and developmentally mature as older adults, and so keep them in a juvenile justice system that helps get them back on the right track.

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Racial & ethnic biases must be eliminated. African-American and Latino youth are over-represented in every phase of Connecticut's juvenile justice system. In 2004, minorities constituted 29% of the state's 10- to 15-year-old population but were 54% of the children referred to juvenile court on delinquency and status offense charges, 68% of the children put into detention, and 74% of those confined to CJTS. This over-representation cannot be explained by differences in delinquent behavior across racial and ethnic groups, but rather appears to stem from differential access to mental health services, differences in parental capacity to act as

strong advocates for youth charged with crime and, likely, some overt discrimination within the system itself.

Many children in Connecticut's juvenile justice system really don't belong there. Children with untreated mental and behavioral health needs often end up in the juvenile justice system instead of in treatment programs. At least 62% of the children admitted to detention in Connecticut, have mental health issues that need treatment. Connecticut is not unique. A recent multi-state study found that 70% of youth in the juvenile justice system have at least one diagnosable mental health disorder and about one in five suffers from a disorder severe enough to impair function. Prevalence of mental health problems was higher among girls; 81% had at least one mental health disorder. Although Connecticut is building a community-based mental health system, it is not yet comprehensive enough to ensure timely, clinically-appropriate care in the least restrictive setting for each child in need.

Connecticut also relies too heavily on law enforcement authorities to address school discipline problems. School systems need to develop the capacity to address misbehaving youth in a developmentally appropriate manner. National studies show that the over-reliance on suspension and expulsion and police intervention for school discipline often reflects significant racial and ethnic biases.

Connecticut must do more to respond adequately to the needs of girls involved in the juvenile justice system. Since Long Lane School was closed in 2003, and despite promises made to address the needs of at-risk teenage girls involved in the juvenile justice system progress has been slow. Girls have unique needs and require services that recognize and respond to issues of gender identity and development. Yet, a December 2005 report prepared for DCF concluded, "there is no system of gender-specific, strengths-based, trauma-informed, culturally competent, relationship-driven girls' services in Connecticut." Recent investments in three new group homes to serve 4-6 girls each, and twelve new treatment foster care placements for girls are important steps; more remains to be done.

Connecticut needs more age-appropriate and specialized services. Fortunately, Connecticut now is stepping up its investment in a continuum of services and placements to address these needs.

The SFY 07 budget made *significant* new investments in needed services. It includes funding for Community Diversion Boards in our three major cities to divert arrested youth, when appropriate, from the juvenile justice system. It also includes funding for: a new state-operated, 5-bed secure facility for girls; three new group homes serving 4-6 girls each; twelve new Multi-Dimensional Treatment Foster Care slots; one hundred new Family Functional Therapy slots, new juvenile justice community re-entry and support services, and additional services to implement the Emily J. Settlement Agreement (e.g., treatment foster care, outpatient substance abuse treatment, wraparound services, therapeutic mentoring, flexible funding for educational success). The SFY 07 budget also includes funding to plan for an expansion of juvenile jurisdiction in delinquency matters to age 18, with a report due from the Implementation Committee to the General Assembly by February 1, 2007.

To accelerate progress in Connecticut's reform of its juvenile justice system, Connecticut should:

- Replace CJTS with small, community-based programs that are more home-like and accessible to families;
- Return juvenile court jurisdiction to include all 16 and 17 year olds and provide all necessary community-based services to serve this new cohort of youth
- Continue the expansion of Connecticut's home and community-based continuum of treatment services;
- Reduce the over-representation of minority youth in the juvenile justice system through training to eliminating racial and ethnic biases and use of more objective screening and assessment tools; and
- Extend timely and appropriate mental health care to at-risk youth.