

March 16, 2015

We are writing regarding the Department of Youth Services (DYS) Fiscal Year 2016-2017 (FY16-17) budget and calling for the reductions proposed in the Governor's budget to be reinvested in youth, families, and communities who are at-risk of or involved in Ohio's juvenile justice system.

Over the past decade, DYS's facility population has declined from over 2000 youth in the late 1990s to less than 500 youth in 2013. This decrease has resulted in significant cost-savings to the state as the number of DYS facilities have decreased 10 to three. Much of these reductions can be attributed to DYS programs to create or strengthen cost-efficient and effective community alternatives to correctional facilities under the Targeted RECLAIM and the Behavioral Health and Juvenile Justice initiative (BHJJ). These decreases are likely to continue under the recently implemented Competitive RECLAIM, which is a \$2.2 million competitive grant program for counties to further invest in evidence-based programs.

We applaud DYS's leadership on these programs and the agency's willingness to embrace research-supported change. However, these changes also have involved significant work and investments by local courts and communities to retain youth safely in their home county and implement these research-based interventions. These achievements have been the result of collective efforts at the state and local level and strong state-local partnerships to improve outcomes for youth.

We believe that the majority of these cost-savings realized through our collective work with DYS should be reinvested back into community programs that serve Ohio's youth, whether in DYS or other agencies, to ensure positive outcomes for young people. While DYS's investments in local communities have made important progress, there are still significant unmet needs for youth across the state, including access to physical and behavioral health services in schools and communities or programs that support families, such as research-based wraparound services like Multi-Systemic Therapy. In addition, delivery of services and programming for youth varies from county to county and funding could be used to continue to expand or establish outcome-focused prevention or diversion programs, as well as creating more community-based alternatives to locked facilities. Reinvesting these cost-savings also benefits all Ohioans as more youth can be given a chance at lifelong success and put on a path to becoming positive, productive members of our communities.

The youth served in the juvenile justice system – and for some youth eventually in DYS facilities – are some of Ohio's most vulnerable, complex, and at-risk youth. For example, many youth in the juvenile justice system are or have been involved with the child welfare system or face behavioral health challenges. In Ohio, 46% of youth in DYS facilities are on the mental health caseload and 85% of youth on this caseload also have a co-occurring substance abuse issue. Additionally, Black and Latino youth are disproportionately represented in Ohio's juvenile justice system; nearly 2/3 of DYS facilities' population are youth of color. Ohio must stop seeing youth in the juvenile justice system as youth with needs that must be addressed in that system; instead, we must work collaboratively and purposefully across agencies to identify and address these challenges early.

We respectfully request that you consider reinvesting a significant portion – if not all – of the \$32 million in savings realized by DYS cost-saving efforts, particularly closing DYS facilities, back into effective, cost efficient local programs in DYS or other agencies that work with youth who are at risk of involvement or involved in the juvenile justice system. This reinvestment will allow us to continue to build on our collective efforts to strengthen youth and the communities in which they live, creating a better future for all Ohioans. We are available to meet and discuss reinvestment and effective programs that work for Ohio's youth.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Ohio

Alicia Monaco, Assessment and Outpatient Mental Health Therapist

Children's Defense Fund-Ohio

Children's Law Center, Inc.

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National Youth Advocate Program  
Ohio Association of Child Caring Agencies  
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