



VOICES FOR OHIO'S CHILDREN

June 15, 2011

Good Afternoon Chairman Grendell, Ranking Minority Member Senator Turner and members of the Senate Judiciary-Criminal Justice Committee.

My name is Yvonne C. Hunnicutt. I am the Youth Development Policy Associate with Voices for Ohio's Children, and it is truly my pleasure to speak with you on behalf of Ohio's more than 130,000 juvenile justice system-involved youth.

Thank you for allowing my testimony today from an advocate's perspective. You see, like many other child/youth advocates, I am most concerned about the fair, equitable and asset-based approach to serving all of our kids. As such, please consider these youth-focused and best practices to address juvenile justice reform.

First, Ohio is greatly positioned to build on current and long term nature of juvenile justice reform efforts. How, you ask? It's simple. We've been asking all the right questions: What do we know about juvenile justice system-involved youth? Where do they live? What are their personalities traits?...their socioeconomic background?...their educational status?...are they born with a unique criminogenic gene that makes them more susceptible to a life of adolescent and inevitable adult criminal behavior? Perhaps some of the answers to these questions offer environmental and other extreme stress factors that contribute to poor and uninformed decision-making skills, however, I am suggesting that we think about the WHOLE child and the genesis of their growth and development as a vessel to smart reform outcomes.

During the Voices for Ohio's Children: Kids Talk Legislative Briefing last Thursday, Dr. William Mosier, Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant with Wright State University, noted in his research that "for most young children, social and emotional development unfolds predictably. They develop close relationships; they regulate their emotions and sooth themselves when they are upset; they share and play with other children; and they listen and follow directions." Many of us understand the importance of these very critical skills of development between birth and 6 years of age. However, without these social and emotional surroundings, children who (undoubtedly) need consultation services are children with severe physical and verbal aggression. They experience social isolation and withdrawal. They often have an inability to interact appropriately with peers and adults. They may have an inability to tolerate frustration due to poor coping and social skills. Without services, these problems have a significant negative impact as a child grows, causing difficulties in school, increasing the likelihood of *criminal behavior, and causing greater behavioral health crises later in life.*" So you see, juvenile justice reform begins with INVESTING in our youth during the formative years and preparing for their adolescent growth and maturation.

I recognize we're talking about a different population of youth, a less cuddly, more risky group of young people – but the fact of this matter is, they are still YOUNG PEOPLE!! So to be fair, let's talk about effective strategies for ensuring a true juvenile justice reform. In 2005, the Youth Transition Funders Group, a collection of experts and researchers, crafted nine tenets based on fundamental fairness; individual, community system accountability; and recognition of young people's individuality and potential. This is further realized by the nine tenets that include:

1. smaller regional facilities;
2. accountability of public & private systems;
3. qualified staff;
4. engagement of families;
5. appropriate discipline and intervention strategies;
6. shared responsibilities through collaborative partnerships;
7. individualized, dynamic treatment;
8. appropriate education; and lastly
9. strong re-entry efforts facilitated by a fair & effective release process

One of the key ingredients to this level of authentic reform is to broaden the coalition of concerned stakeholders and citizens. Our youth are best served by those who understand them intuitively, developmentally, emotionally and culturally. This means, that a collection of those who offer academic-based research with effective best practices, the understanding of the impact of policy as well as practice, must collectively offer their unbiased talents and attention to the betterment of our most vulnerable youth. I have been Blessed to work with a variety of interested stakeholders for more than five years who engage coalitions of voters, constituents, youth and families who raise their voices on behalf of what works for our youth. These same interested stakeholders value trusted relationships with you, lawmakers – people in their communities, their local elected officials, a host of practitioners and juvenile justice professionals. This larger community touches all persons who directly and indirectly are impacted by not only the 130,000 youth served in our juvenile justice system but those who maintain the capacity to further prevent or divert them to effective community-based programs. We must continue to encourage the involvement of people of color, urban and rural communities, the young and old, the poorest to wealthiest constituents and all facets of folks to respond to the need to save and serve this generation. This is true coalition work at its most respected level.

Lastly, reform isn't complete without the engagement and ownership of the state's systems. We must encourage stronger and more cohesive service coordination while maintaining and expanding our partnership with the Ohio Department of Youth Services to see continuing reforms. Unlike many neighboring and "progressive" states, ODYS leadership is committed to community partnerships, family engagement and youth-focused reform with an emphasis on effective reentry opportunities. In the June 2011 draft version of the "Bringing Youth Home: An Overview of States Using Facility Closures and Downsizing to Increase Public Safety, Save Money and Treat Youth more Appropriately" by the National Juvenile Justice Network, (in which Voices is a proud member) appropriately acknowledges Ohio as one of eight states that have reduced

their juvenile facility populations and are now not only reaping the cost savings, but also seeing a better return on their investment in terms of juvenile rehabilitation and public safety. I am happy to report that our state is most recognized for our RECLAIM program, started in 1994, which aims to divert youth from the state-run Ohio Department of Youth Services (ODYS) to community-based alternatives to incarceration by offering counties fiscal incentives (and Targeted Reclaim in the six larger counties). Although in 2008, ODYS settled a class action lawsuit that alleged abusive, inhumane and illegal conditions, policies and practices in ODYS facilities, the settlement also served as a catalytic movement that compelled Ohio's lawmakers and system to make sweeping reforms to its juvenile justice system and lead to facility closures and downsizing. Here are the facts:

- The average daily population in ODYS facilities dropped 40 percent between FY 2002 and FY 2010 and as of April 2011, the lowest population of 768 in the last five years.
- Felony commitments to ODYS facilities decreased from 2,215 in FY 2000 to 836 in FY 2010, a 62 percent reduction
- By closing four juvenile facilities, Ohio will free up over \$57 million in operational expenses that have previously been spent on incarceration
- The number of youth arrested in Ohio decreased by 25 percent between 2001 and 2009

Thus proving the very important role and involvement of ODYS in juvenile justice reform.

Voices joins the interested party in HB 86 including the MacArthur and Gund Foundations, the Ohio Juvenile Justice Alliance and others regarding the juvenile justice provisions and strongly encourage you to support these outcomes offered by my colleagues before me this afternoon. These legislative recommendations provides research-based evidence, demonstrates fiscal responsibility, developmentally appropriate treatment, system-accountability measures, public safety and most importantly, individualization of youth with opportunities for future success.

Senator Grendell, Ranking Minority Member Senator Turner and members of the Senate Judiciary-Criminal Justice Committee, I submit to you as a juvenile justice professional and youth advocate, that we are in a very pivotal position to continue to SHOW ourselves as a concerned state...a state that values our youth and knows what it takes and what works for them to become contributing, responsible members of our larger community. Please continue your great work and consider juvenile justice reform, not as a crime intervention or deterrent strategy but as a research proven, outcome-based youth development investment.

I thank you again for your time and am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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Voices for Ohio's Children is the non-partisan voice of Ohio's nearly three million children. With more than 200 collaborative partners, we impact the changes in public policy that improve the health, safety, education, family stability and childcare of Ohio's children and their families.

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