

Supporting Youth Served in the Juvenile Justice System in the FY 2022-2023 State Budget

Testimony to the Legislative Budget Board and Office of the Governor on the Texas Juvenile Justice Department's 2022-2023 Legislative Appropriations Request

Texas must continue the state's juvenile justice reform efforts. As the Legislative Budget Board and the Office of the Governor consider the FY 2022-2023 Legislative Appropriations Request (LAR) submitted by the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD), Texans Care for Children respectfully recommends the Legislature fund each of TJJD's three exceptional items. This will enable the agency to better address underlying factors that contribute to youth crime, including the use of smart strategies targeting the mental health and developmental needs of youth formally involved with the juvenile justice system - and among youth who are at risk of entering it.

Many children and youth served by the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) have complex needs that often contribute to – and are exacerbated by – their involvement with the justice system. The majority of youth served by TJJD have been exposed to childhood trauma or adversity, which are known to cause physiological disruptions in their ability to manage their emotions and behavior. The agency reports that nearly 1 in every 2 youth referred to juvenile probation has identified mental health needs, and nearly 1 in 10 report thoughts of suicide prior to being referred to the juvenile court. Youth are entering state secured facilities with increasing rates of more complex mental health needs, jumping nearly 40 percentage points in the past six years.

Each of TJJD's three Exceptional Items should be funded to support the agency's continued efforts to reform the state's juvenile justice system. Texans Care for Children would like to highlight the following funding requests which would improve the state's ability to address the underlying trauma and mental health needs that are prevalent among the youth they serve - as well as support smart strategies to prevent youth from entering or penetrating deeper into the juvenile justice system.

Recommendations:

1. **Fully fund Prevention and Early Intervention Grants (EI 1).** TJJJ's base budget eliminates community-based prevention and early intervention grants which serve more than 3,000 children and youth who are at risk of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system. These grants reach children as early as age six with programming that provides things like educational assistance, mentoring, character development, problem solving, anger management, and conflict resolution skills. The grants also support programs that provide parents with skills, services, and support to better manage their children's challenging behaviors. These programs not only prevent youth from formally entering the juvenile justice system, they also increase the likelihood they will be successful in school and avoid risky behaviors like substance use. In 2018, TJJJ's prevention and early intervention grants supported 36 different programs in 32 counties. These prevention and intervention grants have received legislative appropriations since FY14.
2. **Serve youth with intense mental health needs, intellectual disabilities, girls, and youth 14 years and younger in smaller settings (EI 3).** New facilities requested by the agency would provide more targeted interventions that address the specialized needs of each group. This would help address the higher rates of suicidal behavior reported by the agency among youth with intense mental health needs, girls, and younger youth and make treatment programming more accessible to youth with intellectual disabilities.
3. **Enhance staffing ratios for youth with higher needs (EI 3).** Lower staffing ratios are needed for youth experiencing a suicidal/mental health crisis (1:2 ratio), youth with significant mental health needs (1:4 ratio), highly violent youth (1:4 ratio), younger youth (1:4 ratio), and girls (1:6 ratio).
4. **Provide emergency placements for youth at risk for suicide (EI 3).** Crisis mental health stabilization services would allow for immediate support for youth in suicidal or other crises.
5. **Enhance reentry services to youth and families (EI 3).** Fund the agency's request to pilot early intervention programs aimed at preventing youth who are exiting the system from further justice involvement. The project would identify youth trauma at the earliest point possible and provide families with enhanced support and skill-building services that will promote youth success at home and in the community and reduce recidivism.