

Good afternoon, Representative Walker, Senator Bye, members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the DCF budget. I'm Trudy Condio, an attorney representing Connecticut children in state care.

Every day, I find myself wishing that there were more and better programs to serve my clients. But I have never seen the need for more maximum-security beds. I hope that you will stop the Department of Children and Families' plans to open a new locked girls facility at a cost of \$2.6 million.

As I said, the current programming for children, both in CPS and juvenile justice, is inadequate. It is often difficult to find services that are appropriate for a given client. When the right services aren't available, a child can be put on the fast track toward incarceration.

I am representing a 13-year-old who in a very short time accumulated a number of charges for crimes that intensified with each new arrest. This was my client's first involvement with the juvenile justice system. The proposed placement for my 13 year old client is the Connecticut Juvenile Training School, which is no place for a boy that young. The rationale behind this decision is based on the seriousness of his charges. And while there may be an argument to support the proposed disposition, CJTS IS NOT a place for a 13 year old boy who just recently found himself involved in the delinquency system. At one time there were alternatives to placing a youth in a locked facility, such as Children's Home of Cromwell, Mt. St. John's, CT Junior Republic, CT Children's Place. While I managed to convince the state that a NAFI foster home would be a better placement, my client remained in detention several weeks before a match was found.

Now we face a similar situation for the girls involved in the juvenile justice, child protection systems or both. We are told that a locked facility is necessary because so many girls run from less restrictive programs. I've certainly had clients who run from programs. Again, let's look at the programs before we start blaming the kids. As with the boys, there are even less choices for placements; Stepping Stones, Touch Stones, Journey House. A frequent reason I hear for running away is that a girl does not get along with other girls in the facility. We send the same girls who don't get along in detention and because of the limited resources we they often wind up placed in the same program. I believe this could be largely avoided if more programs were organized on a cottage model, allowing DCF to place girls in a specific small group of compatible girls. I also think it behooves the adults running a program to be on the lookout for conflicts and to help girls solve them.

I think we often fail to put ourselves in the shoes of kids in state care. Most don't really want to be where they are placed. They are stuck with the same group of kids, in contrast to kids in the community who can hang out with the friends they choose. They often go to school in their facility. So it's 24/7. There's no chance to have some solitude and decompress or to be around other folks who could, quite possibly be role models to these girls.

Kids also run when they perceive a program as too strict. I am certainly not saying that there should be no rules. But I am saying that programs serving youth in state care should be staffed by adults who understand how to set rules in a loving way.

I've seen parenting teens run from programs because they want to show off their babies to friends and families. Running is absolutely a bad decision. But these incidents

could have been avoided if the programs looked for ways to give girls the contact with family and friends that they crave – within a safe environment.

As someone who has represented trafficked girls, I recognize their vulnerability and have often wished there was a resource that offered services tailored to them. But it should not be in a locked facility. Taking away an exploited girls' freedom will not help her. Incarceration is rarely helpful, but because our range of programs is so weak, it's often the default. When a program performs poorly, there is no consequence for the adults who run it – but the consequences for the children who were badly served there can be severe. We need to do better. We need to start investing in programs that really work and stop investing in fences and locked doors.

I believe there are a number of state owned buildings that are presently sitting empty. I envision the cottage system similar to the Village for Children and Families; each cottage with its own focus and programs to address them. Or CCP with its system of individual buildings perhaps set up as “dorms.” Use the \$2.6 million dollars and invest in system that could very well develop the talent many of our girls in the system have. Offer counseling, groups, therapy, life skills, dance, art. Introduce the girls to something other than what many have become accustomed to; locked away from society either by a key or life's circumstances. Offer them a real opportunity, a chance like many of our children have. I truly believe the right living environment as described, appropriate programs that address and truly meet the needs of our girls will produce young women who believe in themselves because someone believed in them first. Don't lock these girls behind a wall and expect them to act like young ladies when the door is opened.

Thank you.