

# Center for *Children's* Advocacy

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## TESTIMONY OF MARTHA STONE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY TO APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE IN OPPOSITION TO DCF'S PROPOSAL TO ALLOCATE FUNDING FOR MAXIMUM SECURITY FACILITY FOR GIRLS

February 14, 2014

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the proposed DCF budget. My name is Martha Stone, and I am Executive Director of the Center for Children's Advocacy. The Center provides legal representation for vulnerable children and youth and also advocates for systemic change to improve the response of the education, juvenile justice, health and child welfare systems to the needs of poor children.

I have had the opportunity to address the needs of girls in the juvenile justice system for over 20 years. Not only have I represented girls before the Juvenile Court, but in my capacity as the plaintiffs' attorney in the lawsuit Emily J. v. Weicker, I oversaw the litigation and eventual enforcement of consent decrees which addressed the conditions of confinement and mental health and educational needs of youth in the juvenile justice system. I have also sat on numerous national and state committees addressing the needs of girls in the juvenile justice system. On a personal level, I have been a mentor and foster parent to a girl in this system.

This testimony is submitted in opposition to DCF budget proposal to open a girls' maximum security facility on the grounds of the former Riverview Hospital. This \$2.6 million project is unnecessary, ill-considered, and should be halted. It duplicates capacity the state already has and, more importantly, is a poor solution for serving traumatized girls who need to be helped – not locked up in a maximum security setting.

Advocates over the years, including myself, have called for services to be more responsive to juvenile justice girls. DCF answered that request, in part, by creating Journey House, a secure facility for girls on the grounds of a psychiatric facility, whose 14 beds are more than adequate to serve Connecticut's small and declining population of delinquent girls who need that extreme level of restrictive care. Unfortunately, DCF's response stopped there. They never fully implemented the several girls' juvenile justice plans that were developed by state officials and local stakeholders which called for community-based programs that help girls avoid secure placement, and transitional programs that help them achieve permanency.

So why open a second maximum-security facility? DCF cites concern for girls' safety. Many of the girls who would be sent to the new facility have been physically and sexually abused. Some are in foster care. Most suffer from trauma. Many are victims of sex trafficking; others are runaways.

DCF is right to be concerned ... there is a problem. But putting these girls in a maximum security facility is not the answer.

There are many reasons why you should take this opportunity to halt the opening of this facility and put in its place a well-developed continuum for this vulnerable population.

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**Reason No. 1.** Connecticut already has a secure facility for girls. Journey House is locked, isolated and located on the grounds of Natchaug Hospital, with 14 beds and skilled mental health staff. It has more than enough beds to accommodate the small numbers of children who arguably might benefit from secure confinement.

**Reason No. 2.** The state could easily avoid spending millions to renovate and staff a second facility, if it fixed its “over-stay” problem at Journey House. The length of stay at treatment facilities should be no longer than three to five months; research shows that longer confinement has diminishing returns. Girls at Journey House, however, are locked down for an average of 293 days — nearly 10 months. If the state redeployed some of its \$2.6 million it intends to pour into this new facility and instead developed group homes or foster homes for girls who now are held there for too long, more beds at Journey House would be freed up. And, state money could pay for needed treatments, not lumber and duplicate staff.

**Reason No. 3.** There is no state in the country that locks up such a high percentage of its delinquent female population in maximum security settings. The proposed new facility would have 12 secure beds, adding to the 14 at Journey House for a total of 26. But there were only 37 girls committed as delinquent for all of 2012. In 2013, only 23 girls were committed, while the total number of girls served in all settings also dropped. If the new facility opens, the number of secure beds at the state's disposal will exceed the number of girls committed as delinquent in an entire year.

**Reason No. 4.** Children should be incarcerated in maximum security facilities only when they pose a threat to public safety. This facility would be filled with girls who have already been removed from the community because of delinquent behavior and placed in group homes, foster care or residential treatment centers. The rationale for incarceration in this facility is not that they've committed another offense, but that they have run away from their placement or broken its rules. That behavior is not a threat to public safety.

**Reason No. 5.** Incarcerating girls in maximum security for months harms the girls and further burdens taxpayers. DCF has not advanced any evidence showing that a new maximum security facility would reduce recidivism or help girls in any other way. Evidence proves the contrary. Confining girls with little opportunity to interact with the outside world is detrimental long-term and can increase rather than decrease their traumas. Other more appropriate national models exist for girls that run.

**Reason No. 6.** The proposed new facility has moved forward below the legislative radar until now. A shift in public policy of this magnitude requires more examination from both mental health and fiscal experts, as well as national girls' juvenile justice experts. Before millions of public dollars are poured into an unneeded facility, legislators should demand a girls' juvenile justice plan which is informed by national best practices.

Did we learn nothing from the construction in Middletown of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School, a mammoth prison for boys whose efficacy and continuing expense everyone now questions? The proposed girls' facility, although smaller, is now being rushed down the same track. That's a disservice to the girls and every taxpayer in Connecticut.

What should the legislature do? Slow down this effort. Create a legislative Task Force if necessary. Bring in national experts on girls' juvenile justice issues. Require a joint CSSD/DCF girls' juvenile justice plan that has a continuum of services and a thorough data analysis. Girls in the juvenile justice system would be far better served by investments in front-end community services that can prevent involvement in the juvenile justice system entirely and by the creation of options for transitioning out of Journey House with the support they need to be successful.

Respectfully submitted,

Martha Stone, J.D.  
Executive Director