



**TESTIMONY OF THE CONNECTICUT JUVENILE JUSTICE ALLIANCE
FOR THE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN FEBRUARY 23, 2016**

**HB NO. 5135 AN ACT CONCERNING
THE CLOSURE OF THE CONNECTICUT JUVENILE TRAINING SCHOOL
AND THE PUEBLO UNIT FOR GIRLS**

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and members of the Children’s Committee: My name is Abby Anderson; I am the executive director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance. The Alliance is a statewide public policy and advocacy organization dedicated to stopping the criminalization of Connecticut’s children. We believe in prevention to keep children from entering the system, and best practice and policy to ensure that children who do enter the system are treated safely, fairly, and effectively, so that they can succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 5135, An Act Concerning the Closure of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS) and the Pueblo Unit for Girls. While the Alliance fully supports the *concept* of the bill, and appreciates the pressure and insistence on closure as soon as possible, the details are more complex for us. Our perspective is:

1. **We strongly believe the Pueblo Unit can and should close immediately** (and certainly no later than bill’s date of January 1, 2017). The population has been at zero for over a month, and before that was at one.
2. **The timeline for closing CJTS’ main facility should be somewhat longer** (no later than July 1, 2018), **so that better alternatives are in place** to help young men succeed.
3. **We must invest some of the savings from closure into proven alternatives to incarceration.** The stated purpose of the bill is to “reduce costs to the state.” While closure surely will save the state money, it is critical that we ensure our children succeed in other, less expensive, primarily community-based settings.

The Alliance is a member of the Juvenile Justice Planning and Oversight Committee (JJPOC) and signed on to its recent official recommendations, which include legislative items that will be introduced soon. These include the call for closure of CJTS and the Pueblo Unit by July 1, 2018. The JJPOC is collaborating with DCF (also a member) on the specific plan for alternatives to incarceration.

For the Alliance, the end goal is not simply to close CJTS and the Pueblo Unit. It is to build a juvenile justice system that addresses the needs of the young people in it, including those with the greatest needs and challenges. That means *individualized* programming that allows more young people to stay and succeed in their communities — the setting that yields the best results at the lowest cost. It also means a few small, secure facilities (some of which already exist) for those rare youths who cannot succeed at home, built and run with a culture and design that is therapeutic and rehabilitative, not corrections and institutional in nature. Institutions teach children to survive within institutions: as one young man at CJTS described, “they’re teaching me to be an inmate.” It will take time to ensure this alternative continuum of services is in place, and unfortunately it may not be by January 1, 2017.

The Pueblo Unit has had zero girls in it since the second week of January, and only one before that (who was there simply awaiting a better placement). It had only 15 admissions during all of

2015. It is our understanding that the Pueblo staff have been moved to the main CJTS facility. Certainly alternative, individualized, community-based programming and services can be developed and implemented immediately for this very small population of girls and young women, at far less cost.

The reasons to stop using incarceration are well known and understood, including information from the two experts who presented at the Legislative Office Building last week. Dr. Elizabeth Cauffman's research showed that **the process of brain development and maturity stops when youth are incarcerated**. Youth are able to catch up regarding brain maturity post-release, however since **the vast majority of youth stop offending after full brain maturation**, any time spent with that maturation stopped is counter-productive. Dr. Edward Letessa discussed the large body of research showing the questionable effect of incarceration on reducing re-offending.

CJTS and the Pueblo Unit cost \$52.9 million annually to operate. The Department of Children and Families has successfully reduced the number of incarcerated youth by half. With the census so low, the costs per youth skyrocket, without good outcomes to justify the expense.

Nationally, freeing youths from incarceration has succeeded when money is redirected to communities. Strengthening neighborhoods and providers who already have strong bonds to youths and families is a sure path to safety and success. A relationship with a consistent, caring adult has a profound protective effect against offending. Incarceration is so ineffective in part because it disrupts the relationships that should be a lifeline for a child in crisis. The good news is that neighborhood programs are far less expensive than institutional ones. They also prevent recidivism, which is the real cost-saver over time.

On a larger note, each system that serves children needs to be adequately funded and held accountable for its results. The young people at CJTS came into contact with many systems before they were incarcerated. Many first came to DCF as victims of abuse or neglect. Most have an identified special education need. Some have seen a mental health provider. When the state is unable to meet kids' and families' needs sooner, the juvenile justice system is the most expensive way to address them later.

This is not Connecticut's first major juvenile justice reform. We used to lock kids in detention centers for behaviors that were not even crimes — such as truancy or running away. That no longer happens. Before we instituted the change, stakeholders spent two years developing a new network of services. Kids did better and the juvenile justice system shrank, saving taxpayers money. When we raised the age of juvenile court from 16 to 18, again there was a planning period that reached consensus on how to institute the complex reform. There is no question we can continue this momentum and help many more young people and families to succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Alliance member organizations:

AFCAMP, Center for Children's Advocacy, Center for Effective Practice / CHDI, Children's Mental Health Connecticut, Connecticut Legal Services, Connecticut Voices for Children, Connecticut Youth Services Association, Community Partners in Action, FAVOR, LifeBridge, Office of the Chief Public Defender, Office of the Child Advocate, RYASAP, The Tow Foundation, The Village for Families and Children