



**TESTIMONY OF THE CONNECTICUT JUVENILE JUSTICE ALLIANCE
FOR THE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN
PUBLIC HEARING FEBRUARY 16, 2016
IN FAVOR: RB NO. 75 AN ACT CONCERNING DETAINED YOUTH**

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and members of the Children’s Committee: My name is Lara Herscovitch; I am the deputy 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 speak about Raised Bill 75, An Act Concerning Detained Youth. The Alliance supports this bill, which aims to improve the conditions of confinement, type of care, transparency and accountability of state agencies when they detain or incarcerate Connecticut’s children and youth (described in the bill as “secure detention or correctional confinement”). The entities impacted directly are the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Department of Correction (DOC), and the Judicial Branch.

Best practice nationally and in Connecticut shows that the most positive outcomes, as well as cost savings, are achieved when juvenile justice-involved youth are kept in their communities (except in the most extreme circumstances). The Alliance applauds the state’s steady movement away from incarceration, which is typically the most expensive and least effective type of intervention. We are excited about the work of the Juvenile Justice Policy Oversight Committee (JJPOC) that includes DCF and others creating a more robust continuum of community-based care as a better alternative to incarceration. This is directly related to the governor’s announced closure of CJTS by July 1, 2018; in the meantime, the Alliance fully supports all efforts to improve the conditions of confinement for the young people who are there.

The specific changes in the bill include:

- DCF ensuring “a therapeutic and rehabilitational setting” at CJTS (which includes the Pueblo Unit for girls), and utilizing a data driven improvement model with performance based standards (PbS). The Judicial Branch currently uses PbS to drive quality assurance around conditions of confinement, and DCF has used it in the past. The data required to successfully use this model would allow for more transparency and easier reporting.
- A DCF plan (“in collaboration with” DOC and the Judicial Branch) to prevent or reduce the long-term negative impact of the emotional and behavioral well-being of youth confined in their care. Many of the youth who are in the deepest end of our juvenile justice system come in with significant underlying mental health issues. We know that the vast majority of youth at CJTS have more than one DSM-V diagnosis and that 52% of youth in a detention center are on suicide or mental health watch. These needs must be addressed, to ensure that we aren’t labeling behavior as criminal that is actually the manifestation of an illness and inadvertently making a youth’s behavior and prospects for community success worse instead of better. A plan from DCF and the Branch can help ensure that this work is integrated, highlighted, understood and evaluated. We respectfully suggest that this plan would also be submitted to the JJPOC as well as the Committee of cognizance so that there is full

collaboration and integration of the multiple juvenile justice reform efforts underway.

- More oversight and accountability on the use of restraint and seclusion, not only by DCF but also DOC and the Judicial Branch. The Office of the Child Advocate would research and prepare bi-annual reports around conditions of confinement for children and youth in custody. In addition, facilities caring for young people who are court-involved, whether run by a state entity or contractor, would be subject to existing licensing requirements.

In sum, the Alliance believes in holding young people accountable for misbehavior, *in ways that are most likely to help them succeed* in the long-term. We start with the belief that incarceration should be avoided whenever possible. When it is necessary, the presumed goal of confinement is to change behavior and ensure the youth's success in his or her community upon returning there. The conditions of a young person's confinement play a central role in how this behavior is changed; transparency and continuous improvement are essential. Changes such as those included in RB 75 can help improve the type and effectiveness of state and contractor care, which in turn strengthens young human capital, families and communities, all of which in turn saves the state and taxpayers money. We are in full support of them.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Alliance member organizations:

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