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Judiciary Committee
Testimony in Opposition to HB 5642

Esteemed Chairs and Members of the Judiciary Committee: Today, I am writing in opposition to House Bill 5642, which calls for the closure of CJTS by July 1, 2018 without proper funding for future facilities and/or community services.

Providing services to juvenile justice youth in the communities is indeed a decent idea and it should be part of the future service provision that the professional staff at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School embrace. However, it cannot be rushed. It must be done strategically and only after a close examination of relevant data, much of which has not even begun to be collected and measured, not to mention tracked or analyzed. Decisions about closure should not be made until this data is in hand and proposed programs have been tested.

In testimony at regular hearings of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee and the Committee on Children, one consultant, expert and stakeholder after another has attested to the fact that providing for the needs of juvenile justice youth in the community will NOT be successful if programs are not fully-funded and operational, linked to other critical providers, and ready to roll out upon the proposed closure date.

Also, a fact that cannot be ignored is that many of our juvenile justice youth have already failed in these community settings. To be sure, when these highest-risk youth are returned to their communities, the same place where the problems started, they quickly lose supports. We do not want them to become a danger to themselves, to each other, to their families, and to the community at large. That does not promote a successful transition nor does it promote public safety. Some of these youth will always need the structure of higher security settings that can meet their complex needs – not prisons like the Manson Youth Institution, but rehabilitation facilities like CJTS or new versions thereof.

Until such time as Connecticut has developed and implemented a network of fully-funded and functional community service provisions, the most sensible, effective and fiscally responsible alternative is to repurpose CJTS into a multi-programmatic service provision center to provide for all of the youth's needs in one place. Rename it if you must, but I implore you to be pragmatic and creative with your ideas.

Options abound: The Middletown facility could be repurposed to a setting for the less-dangerous youth in detention and correctional facilities. We could be a higher security facility for the more impulsive and violent offenders. We could be a day school, where students unwelcome back to their home districts are bused in to continue their education. We could be a hands-on facility

where youth receive educational and vocational instruction under the tutelage of staff. We could be a multi-programmatic facility that caters to all of these populations. Regardless, making full use of the facility in creative and efficient ways will bring down the annual cost per resident significantly.

Despite what the Child Advocate has suggested, the services that we provide at CJTS are second-to-none. We have the staff, the programming, and the facility in place. As an educator who works with staff in several youth-focused disciplines, I implore you to make use of it. And when appropriate community services are eventually developed, let them locate with us or bridge with us to ensure optimal use of public resources. Let's not make things more complicated than they need to be.

Thank you for your dedication to this important issue.

Suzanne Borner