Opposition to HB 5642, AN ACT CONCERNING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE JUVENILE JUSTICE POLICY OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE.

Submitted by Mishan Holley, Youth Service Officer
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Good afternoon Senator Coleman, Representative Tong and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Mishan Holley. I am a resident of Middletown.

I have spent the last 14 years working as a Youth Service Officer (or YSO) at CJTS in Middletown. Prior to that, I worked two years as a Juvenile Detention Officer. I am a proud member of AFSCME Local 2663, which represents YSOs and other staff at CJTS.

I am here today to speak in opposition to House Bill 5642 I speak from personal experience when I say that closing CJTS and Pueblo would only harm our state's most vulnerable youth. I take great pride in the job that I do. As YSOs we strive to build positive relationships with our residents. For many of them, we are the closest thing they have to a parent or guardian.

Our residents are youth who have engaged in a pattern of crime and have consequently been adjudicated and sent to us through the legal system. Our residents are sent to CJTS only after repeated crimes, oftentimes with very serious charges: weapons, sexual and physical assaults, gang affiliation, drugs, etc.

Many of our residents are the size of full-grown adults. They are big kids with the developmental temperaments of teenagers and oftentimes of toddlers. Whatever their histories or diagnoses, no matter how strong our relationships with them, each and every one of our youth, at any given moment, could become aggressive and violent.

But regardless of their size or inherent propensity to violence, the fact remains that our residents are indeed very troubled and misguided young people who desperately need compassion, respect, guidance and assistance. And who provides all that? We, the staff at CJTS.

Closing CJTS would be akin to the proverbial situation of throwing the baby out with the bath water. CJTS is blessed to have the wisdom and commitment of dedicated teachers, clinicians, YSOs, line supervisors and more. We can and must be part of the solution to protect the programs and services that make a difference in the lives of troubled young men and women.

I have included a list of our accomplishments at CJTS. The media, the child advocate and others often neglect to mention them. I thought you would be interested in seeing the depth of programming and services that positively impact the youth at our facility.

Thank your hearing our concerns. I would be happy to answer any questions.

SOME OF THE MANY SUCCESSES AT CJTS
(IMPOSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE WITHOUT THE PRESENCE AND ASSISTANCE OF OUR YSOs)

Developmental Literacy and Math Programs: Students who are far behind their grade level in reading and math are given intensive classes to boost their skills. Students often make years of growth in a few short months.

Online Learning: Students who are capable of working more independently can progress at their own pace through online learning opportunities. This can expedite their path to graduation, something they once never thought was ever going to be possible.

EcoCrew: Residents involved in the EcoCrew afterschool club learned the importance of being environmentally aware through hands-on sustainability practices including the raising and on-campus care of egg-laying chickens!

Wind turbines: Students were exposed to renewable energy education through learning how wind energy can be generated. Students designed and built a working windmill, which is then tested for effectiveness and efficiency.

Icy Dreams: Students and staff run a breakfast cart in the winter and a frozen ice cart in the summer. Their customers are both on and off campus.

Relationships: Unit staff put on potluck lunches and dinners for the youth at various times throughout the year, especially holidays when the youth may have to be away from family. Staff from throughout the facility enjoy in the feast and festivities.

PBIS: We utilize Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) in our school, a proven effective behavior management system that focused on positive reinforcement.

Student of the Month: Once a month, seven students (one from each living unit) is selected to be our Student of the Month. These students are presented with certificates during speeches given by their teachers in front of the entire school. They are then gifted with a special lunch (put on by our culinary department) and enjoy an afternoon movie.

Guests and Visitors: Wesleyan students have partnered with our students for years, whether to offer academic tutoring or to engage them in drama and performance classes.

Career Classes: Students research careers they might never have even heard of before by using a personalized career curriculum that helps them to discover and target their interests.

Vocational Classes: Students in these classes get hands-on exposure to various vocational disciplines. Some students even get paid for their work! Our vocational programming is one of the best in the state and includes: hairdressing and barbering, small-engine repair, landscaping, building trades, computer science, computer technology, culinary arts and commercial cleaning.

** Our landscaping class achieved a horticulture world record this year for a pumpkin it grew from seed. The pumpkin grew in 12 pounds per cubic foot of soil, which broke the former 10 pound per cubic foot record. Students named the pumpkin the "132.2 CJTS Dinosaur Egg." The pumpkin was harvested so that its seeds could be crossed with other large pumpkin seeds.

Graduations: Since 2010, 90 students have finished their high school credits and graduated while here at CJTS. In fact, students who could have left have actually chosen to stay in order to graduate or to continue with their studies.

NYPUM: The boys in the NYPUM program become trained and certified dirt bike riders. This is obviously a facility favorite.

Art Class and Art Therapy: All aspects of art are covered in both the academic and therapeutic milieus: drawing, painting, sculpture, pottery/ceramics, holiday wreath making. Student work is available for public purchase approximately four times per year; thereby allowing student to learn the business side of things.

Music Class and Music Therapy: These are favorite classes of the residents, as they can use music as a relaxation strategy or practice their skills at their own musical creations.

Team and Recreational Sports: We have a football team, whose uniforms and equipment has been 100% donated by professional and collegiate teams. We also started a lacrosse team last spring, and hold regular Basketball (and now volleyball) Tournaments where staff and students team up to vie for the coveted championship. A favorite of the boys is the slam dunk and the three-point contests.

Health and Wellness: We have offered programs including Morning Fitness, Insanity and yoga.

The Boys' Clubs: Our Boys' Club is an active part of campus life, and provides yet another outlet for our youth to bond with mentors. We also offer Fatherhood Programs for our young men who are either already fathers or who are soon to become them.

Jane Doe: She is currently stable and doing very well at CJTS, where she has formed solid and healthy relationships with dozens of staff members.

THE INTANGIBLES:

There are also the countless intangible, undocumented successes that happen every single day. These happen when a resident:

- makes it through a day of school successfully for the first time since elementary school
- appropriately advocates for himself to earn something that he wants
- uses a new anger-management technique to effectively deal with a stressor
- gets an A on a test for the first time in his life
- is chosen to recite the Pledge of Allegiance over the loudspeaker
- reads a four-syllable word without help for the first time
- gets his first "POSITIVE"
- learns how to trust (for the first time in his life) from a favorite staff
- glows after he is praised for holding the door for a group of teachers
- returns to class after a rough start after accepting counseling and support by a YSO
- touches our snake or our bearded dragon for the first time in his life
- overcomes his fear of water by learning how to swim
- grins with pride when he learns that his reading or math scores have skyrocketed
- shows off a report card filled with As and Bs to a proud parent
- comforts a mom who tears up with joy when she learns of how well her son is doing...

There are so many more stories. Every single day.