

February 23 ,2016

Committee on Children House Bill 5135- Against

Good Afternoon Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and Committee Members,

Today I am speaking in opposition to Proposed House Bill 5135. This bill calls for closure of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School and the Pueblo Unit for girls by January 1, 2017 to reduce costs to the state.

It is true that mistakes were made with the building of CJTS. The front line staff, teachers, clinical, recreation, and others were not part of that decision making. Had they been, we may not be here today discussing this House Bill.

Closure may inevitably be what needs to happen, however setting a date without a solid plan for ensuring public safety and the need to have a secure facility or facilities for youth is irresponsible and unconscionable. For that reason I ask this committee not to support this bill.

As a teacher with the Department of Children & Families for over 30 years I have been witness to the closing of various facilities. Particularly the Long Lane School closing in 2002. Unfortunately, a plan did not exist to deal with the girls that needed a specialized and secure setting. Therefore, there was no place for the girls to go once Long Lane School permanently closed. Parole officers reported that they drove around trying to find placements, and that emergency rooms and prison ended up being the only option for many of these children.

We are now seeing a similar path unfold. Many youth that would normally come to CJTS, are ending up in the prison system at Manson Youth Institute. They are committing crimes that are landing them in the adult system. This is occurring because kids are leaving CJTS too soon and without a transitional plan or supports that bridge a return to the community. The pressure of street life is often impossible to resist when returning home. Attending and staying in school is not a popular choice. Unfortunately, it is more likely that our former students will be drawn into gang life and negative influences once again. So, when I think about CJTS closing, it is sad, not because of the brick and mortar that is CJTS, but because closing this facility and school programming without a plan will not serve our students well.

Over the past few months, sStudents have left CJTS in swift numbers over the past few months. At the town hall meeting recently held by Governor Malloy in Middletown, I asked him if he knew where our children have gone. He did not have an answer to that question. I respectfully request that this committee ask the same question.

Before the closure of CJTS is decided, I implore you as representatives of the public to determine where our former students are now going. And, in the absence of CJTS, where they will wind up.

We will not save money by closing CJTS and putting young men and women out on the streets or in prison. As concerned professionals working with these students – we would like to keep our promise of rehabilitative options and services while they are still juveniles. We must think about their safety and giving this youthful population a real second chance.

What we do understand is that the young men who have come to CJTS after repeated, unsuccessful attempts in schools or community-based programs have - often for the first time - had positive and rewarding experiences at the Cady School and in the Connecticut Juvenile Training School.

If CJTS is not the right setting or needs to be repurposed, we as dedicated teachers and staff want to help find the solution. It is so important to understand that this population of young men need unique services and cannot be written off in this budget process. Any plan by the state must prevent this population from being sent to Connecticut's prison for Juvenile offenders, placed into private sector programs which are not prepared for these students, or returned to communities without support to an unchanged situation where they originally got into trouble. All programmatic changes must be well planned with education and support services being a main priority, or better outcomes will be unlikely.

Thank you to all the Committee Members for your diligent work on this issue.

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