

February 23 ,2016

Committee on Children House Bill 5135- Against

Good afternoon Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and Committee Members. My name is Suzanne Borner and I have been a Special Education teacher at the Walter G. Cady School of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School for the past eight years.

Today, I am speaking in opposition to Proposed House Bill 5135, which calls for the closure of CJTS and the Pueblo Unit for girls by January 1, 2017 to reduce costs to the state.

The current legislative plan upon the closure of CJTS is to provide for our youth's complex and varying needs through community-based programming. However, these programs do not yet exist and significant funding will be needed to develop them.

In testimony at regular hearings of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee and the Committee on Children, one person 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 providers and ready to roll out upon the proposed closure of CJTS less than one year from now.

As of now, due to the Length of Stay Initiative, the young men at CJTS are being moved out of the facility long before they are ready to leave, long before they receive the full benefits of our comprehensive programming. In an environment such as this reoffending, therefore, is almost inevitable. But when they do, they are not being sent back to us. So where are they going? Many are being sent directly to Connecticut's juvenile prison, the Manson Youth Institution.

And the youth who are not sent to Manson fare no better; they are simply placed back in the settings where their problems originated in the first place. Back on their home turf, the highest-risk youth in our state quickly become dangers to themselves, to each other, to their families, and to the community at large.

The idea for ultimately providing services to juvenile justice youth in the communities is indeed a good one and it is a dialogue that we at CJTS want to be part of, but it is something that cannot be rushed. It must be done strategically and only after a close examination of relevant data, much of which hasn't even begun to be measured yet, not to mention tracked or analyzed.

At this juncture, Connecticut is simply not ready to provide juvenile offenders with community-based care.

Until such time as we are, consider the most sensible and fiscally responsible alternative: repurposing the existing facility into a multi-programmatic service provision center. Rename it if you must. But use it. Expand the services that can be provided in this setting to include youth in detention, youth in Manson and other juvenile justice youth. The facility could be a day school where youth unsuccessful or unwelcome in their home schools can complete their education; it could be a respite to youth in imminent danger on the streets; it could be a trauma-based therapeutic program for the multitudes of young people with traumatic histories; it could be a high-security facility for the more impulsive and violent offenders who desperately need the locks and the fence. The options are limitless if we are creative and use some common sense.

The state will NOT save lives or money by sending juvenile offenders to prison. The state WILL save lives and money by utilizing a facility and programming that already exists and has already proven to be successful. Otherwise, we are trying to reinvent a wheel that has already proven to roll pretty darn well.

I implore you not to support Proposed House Bill 5135. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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