Senator Flexer, Representative Abercrombie, Senator Somers, Representative Case and members of the committee:

My name is Erica Bromley and I am the Juvenile Justice Liaison for the CT Youth Services Association (CYSA). The Association leads, strengthens and supports a unified network of Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs) who are bound by CGS sec. 10-19m. YSBs are dedicated to promoting the well-being of Connecticut’s children, youth and families. CYSA is a professional organization that advocates for and works with its members to best serve youth and families across the state. CYSA has been an integral part of the YSB system since its founding in 1972.

I am here today to discuss the Governor’s proposed budget which includes $4.1 million to “maintain important clinical interventions and other services utilized by non-delinquent youth following the reallocation of juvenile justice funding by the legislature to the Judicial Branch, further enabling the department to meet Juan F. requirements.” These services are important for the support of youth and families in need, however, it does not appear to include the funds required to restore funding to the Juvenile Review Boards (JRBs), or to fund the entire JRB system. Juvenile Review Boards are a front-end, community-based diversion program designed to keep youth from entering the Juvenile Court system. JRBs have been in existence for over 50 years and there are currently 88 JRBs statewide serving 135 towns. Instead of referring a youth to court, police or schools can refer the youth to a JRB where the youth is held accountable for their actions and are provided services to help prevent future problem behaviors. JRBs are widely seen to be one of the key reasons why the size of juvenile court caseloads has been shrinking over the past decade.

There is widespread agreement on the success and value of the JRB system, however, previous funding for the JRBs was one of the casualties of the funding cuts made when the responsibility for committed delinquent youth was transferred from DCF to the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch. Previously, DCF provided funding for 35 of the 88 JRBs statewide, including rural, suburban and urban JRBs, in the amount of $1.26 million. For Fiscal Year 2019, those funds were zeroed out in the state budget. One-time federal dollars were pieced together for FY 2019 to partially fund the JRBs that were previously being funded through DCF. Several communities were still forced to scale back on services, shut down for a portion of time, or accept less cases because of the timing and modification of the stop-gap funds for the current year. There is currently NO plan for ongoing funding when these Federal funds run out in mid-2019.

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The entire Juvenile Justice system, as well as other youth serving systems, have faced major cuts over the past few years. The Juvenile Review Boards have played a key role in diverting youth from entering the system and saving money in the process. Funding must be restored to the JRBs in order to provide police, schools and families more effective, appropriate and less expensive ways to address youth misbehavior. Sending them to court is not the best option, both for the youth and for the fiscal health of our state.

In FY 2017, JRBs served over 2800 youth. These youth may have been referred to court if the JRB was not an option, costing more money and putting these youth at a much higher risk for returning to the court system. Additionally, youth who complete their JRB recommendations will be free of a criminal record, which is not necessarily the case for those who go to Juvenile Court. Serving youth in their community in the least restrictive manner, matching youth with appropriate services, and holding youth accountable for their actions through a JRB is the most productive and responsible way to work with these youth.

Funds to the JRBs must be a priority if the State of Connecticut wants to continue to prioritize Diversion and community-based services for youth.

Thank you for your time and attention and I am more than happy to answer any questions you may have.