March 4th, 2019

Appropriations Committee

Regarding H.B. No. 7148 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIAL ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2021, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

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

Hello, my name is Dana Forry and I am the Director of the Bridgeport Juvenile Review Board (JRB) and co-Facilitator of the Greater Bridgeport Local Interagency Service Team (LIST) both under RYASAP (The Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership) in Bridgeport. The overarching mission of the LIST is to encourage collaborative efforts among local stakeholders for assessing the physical, social, behavioral, and educational needs of children and youth in their respective communities that leads to juvenile justice involvement, and for assisting in the development of comprehensive plans to address such needs. The JRB is a youth court and arrest diversionary program that links young people who have gotten into minor trouble at school or in the community to supports and services and helps them repair the harm done by their actions. JRBs are widely seen to be one of the key reasons the size of the juvenile court has been shrinking over the past decade.

I am writing today representing both the LIST and the Bridgeport JRB to outline my concerns in regards to the proposed State budget. While the Governor’s proposed budget adds $4.1 million for community services lost when juvenile justice moved from DCF to the Judicial Branch, it does not appear to include the $1.2 million required to restore the funding for Juvenile Review Boards that was lost last year.
Despite widespread consensus on the success and utility of the JRB system, this funding stream for JRBs was zeroed out in last year’s state budget. The $1.26 million lost had supported 35 of the more than 88 JRBs operating across the state in cities, suburbs and rural towns. One-time, federal dollars were found to piece together partial funding for some JRBs, but several communities were unable to maintain full programs and services. There is NO plan for ongoing funding when Federal funds run out in mid-2019.

Statewide, JRBs served over 2800 youth in FY 2017. The Bridgeport Juvenile Review Board was one of the JRBs which was zeroed out in last year’s state budget. Each year our JRB serves approximately 150 youth, diverting them from an arrest or referral to juvenile court. While the one-time federal dollars allowed the Bridgeport JRB to remain open, the program is only on track to serve 100 youth this year due to the reduction in funding. We have maintained anywhere from a 70-80% successful discharge rate each year since we started working with young people back in 2007 demonstrating the success of the program.

Bridgeport SROs (School Resource Officers) note that if the JRB is not funded and is unable to continue serving youth this would be a catastrophic loss for them. They use the JRB as a tool every day in their efforts to avoid arrests. Since 2012, school based arrests have gone from almost 300 down to about 40 per year. The JRB has played a key role in this major decrease.

Furthermore, the Bridgeport JRB and many other JRBs across the state also alleviate some of the burden on juvenile court by accepting referrals that are diverted back to the community from juvenile court. If this option to divert to low level offenses away from juvenile court to a JRB is not available, youth will be at much higher risk for returning to the court system, will end up with a criminal record and will ultimately cost the state more money. 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 help with these youth.
The juvenile justice system has faced steep cuts in the past few years. Juvenile Review Boards have played a key role in diverting youth from that system. Funding 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 Appropriations Committee for reading my testimony today. Please contact me at 203-989-0566 or dforry@ryasap.org if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

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