Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Leslie Rojas and I am an intern from the City of Hartford’s Department of Families, Children, Youth and Recreation’s Youth Division. The Youth Division works with stakeholders to ensure that Hartford’s youth ages nine to twenty-four have quality opportunities to develop competencies critical to academic success and future self-sufficiency. As Hartford’s Youth Service Bureau, the Youth Division coordinates the city’s Juvenile Review Board, which is currently mandated by the State of Connecticut without any funding.

I am here today to discuss the Governor’s proposed budget. Although the budget adds $4.1 million for community services, it does not seem to include the funds required to restore the funding for the Juvenile Review Boards (JRBs). Juvenile Review Boards are a front-end, community-based diversion program designed to assist youth and families. Instead of referring a youth to court, police or schools, the youth is referred to a JRB that can hold them accountable for their actions and provide services to help prevent future misbehavior. JRBs are wisely seen to be one of the key reasons the size of the juvenile court has been shrinking over the past decade.

JRBs lower expenses and reduce recidivism. The costs of community-based diversion programs is estimated to be $880 per youth,\(^1\) which is considerably less than the costs of detaining youth in juvenile facilities. According to the American Correctional Association, juvenile facilities cost an estimated $88,000 a year per youth.\(^2\) In order to make lasting changes to the youth’s behavior, JRBs provide them with services that will meet their needs. Studies show that youth who receive diversion services have lower recidivism rates than youth who are placed in confinement.

Although there is widespread consensus on the success and utility of the JRB system, previous funding for the JRBs was one of the casualties of the funding cuts made when juvenile justice shifted from DCF to the Court Support Services Division. Previously, DCF provided funding 35 of the 88 JRBs operating statewide, 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 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.

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 for them must be restored in order to provide schools, police, and families more effective, cheaper ways to address youth misbehavior than sending them to court. It is critical that the funding of the JRBs is restored through the budget of the Department of Children and Families. Without the option of the Juvenile Review Boards, the juvenile courts will face significant added burden.

Thank you, Appropriations Committee, for reading my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions and can be reached at intern2.COH@hartford.gov.

Leslie Rojas
Student Internship Coordinator
City of Hartford’s Department of Families, Children, Youth, & Recreation
550 Main Street, Room 305
Hartford, CT 06103