Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Christina Quaranta; I am Director of Policy and Community Connections for the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance. The Alliance is a statewide public policy and advocacy organization dedicated to stopping the criminalization of Connecticut’s children. We believe in prevention to keep children from entering the system, and best practice and policy to help kids who do enter the system to be successful.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the governor’s proposed budget for the State Department of Education (SDE). The Alliance works in close partnership with Justice Advisors, young adults with first- or second-hand justice system experience who want to ensure their expertise drives policy. From their own experiences and conversations with their peers, they have identified lack of positive, credible role models, lack of effective programs and lack of overall investment in them and their communities as drivers into the juvenile justice system. Connecticut statutes name Youth Service Bureaus, under SDE as the entities to foster local, community-level services and relationships for youth. Their line items must be fully funded. The legislature must also, finally, support the Community Based Diversion System that it created but left unfunded.

Youth Service Bureaus run and support community programs that help children at risk of becoming justice-involved develop their potential, build positive relationships with role models and pro-social peers, and improve their academic performance. Youth Service Bureaus also run Juvenile Review Boards, specifically designed to be a pure diversion from the court system, giving police, schools, and families a way to address youth’s misbehavior quickly, directly, and using restorative justice processes that are proven to be more effective for victims, offenders, and the community than traditional court interventions. There are more than 85 JRBs around the state in rural towns, suburbs and the cities. The line items in SDEs budget are one element of funding for these JRBs.

In 2016, Connecticut rightfully determined that truancy should not be an issue for the courts. In the past, schools and communities turned to the court to try to find services for youth who were out of school. They now are responsible to do that work themselves. Dollars, about $3 million, that used to be appropriated to the Judicial Branch to make connections between families and providers (and provide support services) were absorbed into the General Fund when that change went into effect, leaving communities scrambling. The problem isn’t that the courts are no longer involved, the problem is that programs and services the court contracted with and referred to closed when they lost funding. Schools, police, and families are given the suggestion to reach out to the YSB for help when a child is missing a lot of school. The YSBs do what they can but were given no tools to do their work. Funds need to be allocated so that communities can provide for youth and families in need.
The Diversion System focuses on identifying and addressing the underlying needs/symptoms of a child’s negative behavior and putting earlier intervention supports in place for the child and family. It also ensures a screening process and service matching. The Diversion System maximizes existing mechanisms to connect children, families, and schools with resources in their community, and diverts children from the care of state agencies.

The Diversion System creates a Coordinating Hub where referrals for negative or risky behavior, or for those at risk, will go using a streamlined and standardized process. The Coordinating Hub in the Diversion System plan is the Youth Service Bureau System. One key element of successful work with delinquent and status offending youth, as well as with those at-risk, is the ability to collaborate and work with both the child and their family. Without input and collaboration, success is unlikely. The YSB is unique as it is not tied to the court system, the school system, or the DCF system. That can often mean more willingness and a higher comfort level in agreeing to address needs. This Diversion System allows for the Coordinating Hub to play that role, through a standardized process, to engage and then refer for appropriate services, or provide them within their agency.

As we continue to discuss moving away from incarceration and towards community-based services, one concept keeps coming up…..the 4 R’s…REDUCE, REFORM, REPLACE, and REINVEST. These concepts can be applied not only to the back-end of the justice system, but to the front end as well. As we talk about creating and implementing a Diversion System, we can REDUCE the number of children who enter a system, we can REFORM the way we are serving and identifying our children prior to their involvement, we can REPLACE the current system of referring children to court or other systems in order for them to receive services and create a simplified and streamlined process using and enhancing existing structures, and finally, and most importantly, we can REINVEST funds from where they are currently being used and put them into the community where the children will be going. Funds should follow children….it’s that simple.

Connecticut needs to invest money in the front end of the juvenile justice system in order to prevent young people from entering it in the first place. If youth do enter it, funds need to be present to divert them, offer them programs, and work with them and their families. The current budget proposed for SDE and other agencies, branches, instead undermines those supports, leaving only the most expensive and ineffective options, like detention. (In 2018 the average length of stay in detention was 14 days at $800/night – for a total of $11,200 per stay per kid). That is not an efficient use of our taxpayer dollars, especially when best practice tells us that detention stay will most likely NOT make that child less likely to recidivate.

Connecticut has been a leading state in juvenile justice reform and cutting back on spending and investment now, will only cause Connecticut’s youth, families, and communities to take a leap backwards, and for Connecticut to slide into a shadow of its former self.

We urge the legislature to put children, families, and communities first and ensure that Youth Service Bureaus, Juvenile Review Boards, and the Community-Based Diversion System get the funding they need.

Alliance member organizations: