



H.B. No. 6439 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023, and Making Appropriations Therefor

Support for the Budget for the Department of Children and Families – WITH ADJUSTMENTS

March 3, 2021

Senator Kushner, Representative Abercrombie, Senator Cicarella, Representative Betts 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. We recognize that the existing Youth Service Bureau funding under DCF has been kept whole and we are more than pleased to see that during these uncertain times. However, there has been no substantial additional funding for the YSBs or the Juvenile Review Boards (JRBs) and still, no funding for the Community Based Diversion System.

YSBs have adjusted during the pandemic to support youth and their families with everything from basic needs to mental health support. The repercussions of this pandemic are still unknown but based on the current status of many of our youth and families, we know that additional services will be needed once life returns to "normal". YSBs must be supported to accommodate this population along with the at-risk and delinquent populations moving forward. The YSBs have always been positioned and statutorily mandated to provide support to our youth and families across CT.

CT has been at the forefront of Juvenile Justice Reform and the Juvenile Justice Police and Oversight Committee (JJPOC) has led the way in legislative reform. We continue to move away from incarceration and system involvement and towards community-based services, however the funding has not followed. In 2018, The Community Based Diversion System was codified in state statute and since its inception, requested funds have not been provided.

The Community Based 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.

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The Diversion System created a “Coordinating Hub” where referrals will go for negative or risky behavior, or for those at risk, using a streamlined and standardized process. The Coordinating Hub is the Youth Service Bureau System. Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs) are well positioned to serve as the Coordinating Hub. The benefits of creating a fully implemented Community-Based Diversion System include decreased referrals to Juvenile Court, increased participation in appropriate services and programs, increased family engagement, decreased rates of recidivism, a reduction in the stigma/labeling associated with formal juvenile justice system involvement and a reduction in costs associated with crime and incarceration.

The YSB system is well positioned in the community to provide services, make referrals and most importantly, to engage the families in the process. 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.

The Juvenile Review Boards (JRBs) are also a critical component of the reform work to date. JRBs 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 89 JRBs statewide serving 139 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 using a restorative approach and are provided services to help increase future success. 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.

As behaviors are removed from court jurisdiction, they are filtered to the community, specifically to the YSBs and JRBs. On top of already handling delinquency cases, the removal of Truancy/Defiance of School Rules as well as Runaways, Beyond Control and Indecent/Immoral Conduct (all status offenses) were all removed from juvenile court jurisdiction and replaced with a pathway to the YSBs. Some of these cases may also be seen by the JRB for more robust case management. With an increase in cases for both the YSBs and the JRBs, there comes a need to increase capacity, which includes increased resources. The expectations of the state’s JJ reform efforts have largely fell on the YSB System and the JRB process for diversion, but without substantial support. Investment in these changes must follow as we need to continue to reduce the amount of kids entering the system by providing them with adequate and appropriate community-based services.

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 also be increased for all JRBs in order to provide police, schools and families more effective, appropriate and less expensive ways to address

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youth misbehavior. Sending them to court is not the best option, both for the youth and for the fiscal health of our state.

Funds to the Community Based Diversion System and for 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 today and I am happy to answer any question you may have.

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