Article V: Texas Juvenile Justice Department

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NAMI Texas is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization founded by volunteers in 1984. We are part of the nation’s largest grassroots mental health organizations and we exist to help improve the quality of life for individuals with mental illness and their families. Around the state, we have 27 local NAMI affiliate organizations and approximately 2,000 members.

The Detriment of Youth Incarceration

In their Legislative Appropriations Request, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) requests roughly $63 million in Exceptional Item 3 to build three new facilities to serve girls, young offenders, and youth with intense mental health needs. TJJD justifies the request by correctly suggesting that these vulnerable groups require individualized attention and care in facilities with smaller populations and lower resident-to-staff ratios. To address staffing concerns, these facilities would be built close to urban centers.

Unfortunately, NAMI Texas believes that this approach to treatment for youth with unique mental health needs may cause more harm than benefit. A recent report by the Justice Policy Institute notes that detention negatively impacts the mental and physical well-being, education, and future employment of youth.¹ For example, incarcerated youth experience:

- Increased risk of suicide and self-harm.
- Greater difficulty in returning to school.
- Decreased future earnings and employment stability.
- Increased delinquent behavior and risk of recidivism.

Further, a complaint filed by Texas Appleseed and Disability Rights Texas to the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice asserts that congregating justice-involved youth can increase risk of physical and sexual abuse.² While an estimated 7% of incarcerated youth report sexual victimization, approximately 12.5% of youth report the same in Texas detention facilities.

Finally, a recent emphasis on prevention and diversion has contributed to decreased demand for juvenile state residential beds. The Legislative Budget Board projects the juvenile state residential population to decrease 2.7% per year from 2020 to 2025 and to remain 44.7% below operating capacity. To build three new facilities to support decreasing residential populations may be an inefficient use of limited financial resources.

The Value of Community Based Services

Rather than funding the construction of three new correctional facilities, NAMI Texas supports increased funding for prevention and diversion for justice-involved youth, as included in Exceptional Items 1 and Exceptional Item 2. A study conducted in Texas found that community-based diversion programs produced a 14% reduction in recidivism for adjudicated youth. As suggested above, the mental health consequences associated with incarcerating youth may also contribute to increased future utilization of crisis services.

Further, providing services to youth in their communities provides opportunities for improved academic and occupational achievement. A recent study found that 43% of incarcerated youth receiving remedial education in detention did not return to school and another 16% dropped out within 5 months of returning to school. With respect to employment, one study found that detaining youth reduced work time over the next decade by roughly 30%. In addition to employment and education, the development of healthy relationships that can occur with community-based services can help youth “age out” of delinquency.

Finally, prevention and diversion programs can save the state significant sums of money. A study conducted in Tarrant County found the cost of youth detention per day ($121) is 3.5 times greater than that of providing services in the community ($35). According to the National Juvenile Detention Association, the cost of a single detention bed can cost taxpayers between $1.25 and $1.5 million over a twenty-five-year period to build, finance, and operate. In light of the human and economic cost associated with incarcerating youth, increased funding for community-based services may be the investment Texas youth need.

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