
**Announcement by Governor Pritzker to Transform Juvenile Justice in Illinois
Statement by the John Howard Association
July 31, 2020**

The John Howard Association (JHA) applauds Governor Pritzker's announcement today to move away from a juvenile justice system that is overly punitive, utilizes harsh adult prisons and is detrimental to youth development and success. Governor Pritzker and Lieutenant Governor Stratton outlined a vision to transform juvenile justice in Illinois to a system that is nurturing, rehabilitative, and keeps all families safe by focusing on what youth need, not on what they did. Closing existing Illinois Youth Centers (YCs) which are punitive, stark, and isolating and providing needed support to youth in their communities will improve lives and outcomes. Putting youth in prisons does not teach a lesson or change behavior; quite the opposite, it entrenches the path into the adult prison system.

As Illinois' only independent citizen correctional oversight organization, JHA goes into adult and juvenile facilities to monitor conditions of confinement and the treatment of the people who are incarcerated. JHA advocates for a system that is just, fair, safe, and humane. JHA has routinely reported on the dysfunction rife within the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) facilities. Among the issues noted in our reports are the lack of rehabilitative programming, adequate mental health treatment, focus on family connection and support, and opportunities for meaningful change. The youth in state custody need love, support, and opportunity, not punishment. As of May 31, 2020, approximately 71.5% of the youth in IDJJ had at least three co-occurring mental health diagnoses as specified by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, with approximately 40% of these youth having four or more diagnoses. In addition to this, 57.5% of youth in IDJJ at this same time were taking psychotropic medication.¹ Our focus should be on investing in the services and supports these youth need in their communities to keep them from having contact with the justice system in the first place.

The justice system is a driver of racism, disproportionately harming youth of color and those who are impoverished. As of June 30, 2020, 82% of the 102 youth in Illinois state custody were Black and Brown² while Black youth made up only 15% of the youth population in the state. Inside the facilities, Black and Brown youth have been targeted for additional prosecution, often as adults, for behavior occurring while incarcerated by IDJJ, ensuring increased trauma and detrimental impact by pushing them into adult prisons. This devastating trajectory hurts youth, their families, communities, and every person in Illinois.

¹ IDJJ monthly report May 2020,

<https://www2.illinois.gov/idjj/Documents/May%202020%20Monthly%20Report.pdf>

² Unpublished data from the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, July 30, 2020; will be publicly reported in Agency's June 2020 monthly report which will be made available at <https://www2.illinois.gov/idjj/Pages/Data-and-Reports.aspx>

Yesterday the organizations Youth Correctional Leaders for Justice and the Fair Prosecution of Youth issued a joint statement expressing their opposition to the operation of youth prisons. In the statement, these leaders point out that, “[b]y any measure, our overuse of incarceration for youth is ineffective, inefficient, and inhumane...Our current approach too often leaves youth further traumatized and less able to pursue a productive and positive adult future, largely because we continue to rely on archaic, dangerous, adult-style correctional institutions – youth prisons – as the anchor of our system. These failures leave our communities less safe.”³ JHA commends these leaders for their commitment to system change and protection of youth in conflict with the law throughout this country. JHA also commends Illinois State leaders for following this movement away from ineffective adult prisons to a system that is nurturing and recognizes the humanity of all people.

JHA is thrilled that the plan put forward by the Governor and IDJJ Director Mueller to transform Illinois’ juvenile justice system focuses on investing in opportunity and therapeutic intervention rather than using limited resources to operate facilities that inflict trauma. Closing the existing IYCs as quickly as possible and infusing dollars, time and effort into community-based, wrap-around services and small, rehabilitative residential centers close to youth families when intensive interventions are called for is not only smart policy; it is fair, just, and moral.

As Illinois looks to a future where youth are helped not hurt, youth are nurtured not punished, and where resources are invested in people and communities not in the operation of decrepit and harmful correctional institutions, it is our hope that we will apply these same principles to the adult prison system.

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For more information, please contact:

Jennifer Vollen-Katz
Executive Director
John Howard Association of Illinois
jvollen@thejha.org
(312) 291-9183 ext. 205

³Joint Statement by Fair and Just Prosecution of Youth and Youth Correctional Leaders for Justice, July 30, 2020, <https://yclj.org/joint-statement>.