
JHA Testimony in support of the FY23 Proposed Budget for the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice to the House Appropriations - Public Safety Committee and Senate Appropriations—Criminal Justice Sub Committee
March 2022

I. Correctional experience and expertise:

John Howard Association (JHA): JHA is the only independent citizen correctional oversight organization that goes into Illinois' prisons, adult and juvenile, to directly observe conditions and speak with staff, administrators and prisoners. For 120 years, JHA has served the people of this state by monitoring Illinois' prisons, policies and correctional practices.

II. JHA puts forth the following recommendations regarding the proposed budget for IDJJ, SFY 2023:

Recommendation 1:

The Department's recommended FY23 budget allows DJJ to pursue the 21st Century Illinois Transformation Model announced by the Office of the Governor and Lieutenant Governor on July 31, 2020. This model focuses on a transition away from adult-style prisons toward closer to home models which provide community-based wraparound support and establishing a continuum of services to maximize the success and potential of the youth.

As Illinois undertakes steps to transform the state-run juvenile justice system, IDJJ must be fully resourced to care for youth in their custody and to prioritize their health, safety and well-being. While resources are stretched thin throughout Illinois due to the impact of the pandemic, this is not the time to reduce the Agency's budget. Money must be spent contemporaneously to care for youth currently in custody and to build community capacity in order to move IDJJ to a "closer to home" model that prioritizes keeping youth in their communities with wrap around supports that provide needed assistance to help guide youth forward in a healthy, safe and productive way.

The [Transformation Plan](#) announced by the Governor in July of 2020 anticipates limited use of custody, and where necessary, it envisions small, closer to home residential facilities that house fewer youth allowing for individualized attention and support. Many of the existing Illinois Youth Centers are not fit or well suited for youth. It is critical that any money invested in facility maintenance or renovation is done so with the best interests of youth at the forefront of any expenditure. Ensuring that future sites comport with the goals of rehabilitating and supporting youth with compassion requires a plan that includes that youth in State custody remain close to their home community in a supportive, small, treatment oriented residential setting, staffed by credentialed and qualified individuals.

JHA urges IDJJ to put forward a specific plan for transitioning away from our current use of five large, out date facilities that no longer meet the needs of youth or Illinois' changed juvenile justice system including what types of facilities will be needed, location, size, specific accommodations, staffing needs, and available community resources for the building or

renovating of any property to be used for this purpose. An independent assessment of IDJJ infrastructure to gauge viability of use of particular facilities for youth or adults in other state-run systems and determine realistic cost estimates of required maintenance and upgrades is an important step Illinois should take to ensure that the plans to change the structure of IDJJ create the needed and intended transformation. The aforementioned plans and assessment should be shared with the public and a meaningful opportunity to provide feedback should be made available. Before spending money to build or renovate existing structures for the purposes of housing youth in state custody, it is important that the goals and plans be shared and input solicited from stakeholders, experts and the impacted community.

JHA supports the Transformation Plan and looks forward to seeing advancements made to reduce reliance on youth prisons and implement new supports to better help youth move forward safely and productively. The Transformation Plan includes closing down existing IDJJ facilities, which JHA supports; many of the youth centers pose insurmountable infrastructure issues and present unsuitable environments for youth. Illinois should not invest more money in old, prison like facilities that do not comport with a closer to home model that puts individual needs and attention at the center of juvenile justice.

Recommendation 2:

IDJJ Proposed budget includes funding to hire additional Independent Juvenile Ombudsperson staff to further secure and protect the rights of youth in the facilities and Aftercare programs, JHA recommends a larger funding allocation to build the capacity of this office to provide oversight of all youth in state and county custody in Illinois.

JHA is pleased that IDJJ included allocation of increased resources for the Independent Office of Juvenile Ombudsman (IOJO) in the Department's FY22 budget request. The statute that authorizes the IOJO directs that funding for the office run through IDJJ, without specifying total funding or capacity for the office. In the last four years, the IOJO has been enormously beneficial to youth in custody in Illinois, addressing questions and concerns, and raising issues so that they are identified and resolved earlier, and improving communication with the families of youth who are in custody. The importance and impact of this office are myriad. Not only has the presence of an Ombudsman served to protect the rights of youth and improve protections for them, it has likely reduced IDJJ's exposure to costly litigation.

In addition to safe guarding the rights and well-being of youth in IDJJ, the IOJO should be expanded to serve youth who are in county run juvenile detention centers. Increased funding beyond what is proposed in the FY22 budget is needed to adequately resource the IOJO in order to provide oversight to every correctional facility housing youth in Illinois. As the Transformation plan is implemented, fewer youth will be in state run facilities. However, it is anticipated that many youth may still be in county custody prior to the resolution of their case. Expanding the oversight of the IOJO to include the detention centers is important for several reasons: the need to ensure the safety and well being of all youth who are detained or imprisoned, providing youth with a way to access help and assistance outside of a closed facility, and creating stronger connections and links between county juvenile justice agencies and IDJJ to better serve youth and meet their individual needs.

Recommendation 3:

IDJJ proposed FY23 budget maintains compliance with the MH v. Findley and the RJ v. Mueller consent decrees. The budget prioritizes implementation of evidence-based and cognitive behavioral interventions, restorative justice and trauma training.

JHA recommends that this Committee resource IDJJ at the Agency's requested amount for FY22 in order to ensure that incarcerated youth needs are met, youth are protected and that efforts to improve internal policies and practices continue. Since 2012 efforts to come into compliance with consent decrees have been ongoing, and resources are needed to address remaining areas in need of attention to improve outcomes and ensure youth inside IDJJ facilities are safe and well cared for.

Rehabilitative programming and practices, educational programming and vocational training/job skill acquisition programs, as well as mental health treatment for youth in state custody must be prioritized and therefore adequately resourced. Reducing the Department's budget will erode programming and treatment availability for the youth in State custody and worsen already difficult living conditions.

The pandemic has highlighted the need to increase efforts and expend resources to better connect youth with their families and loved ones. IDJJ must ensure that family communication, engagement and visits can happen safely, including resourcing family travel to visit youth in custody as well as paying for families to have access to and use of audio and video equipment in order to stay in communication with their child. Resources continue to be needed to ensure that spaces for visits are sanitized and are otherwise set up safely to accommodate in person visits.

In closing, JHA asks this committee to consider this submitted testimony and the recommendations contained herein. IDJJ must be adequately resourced to care for youth in state custody, implement plans designed to transform the juvenile justice system, and to expand the Office of Juvenile Ombudsman to serve and protect all youth in criminal justice custody.

Respectfully Submitted,



Jennifer Vollen-Katz
Executive Director
John Howard Association of Illinois
70 East Lake Street, Suite 410
Chicago, IL 60601
331-264-4081
jvollen@thejha.org