
June 21, 2023

Dear Governor Pritzker,

On behalf of the John Howard Association of Illinois (JHA), I write to respectfully request you sign Senate Bill 2197, which aims to bolster the protection of our youth within county juvenile detention centers. This bill proposes the expansion of the existing Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsman's (OIJO) duties to include the 16 county juvenile detention centers across our state. JHA appreciates your commitment to juvenile justice reform in Illinois and the efforts which have been realized through the dedication of this administration to improving outcomes for youth who are involved in the justice system.

The OIJO, established in 2015, has played a vital role in safeguarding the rights of youth within Illinois' juvenile prisons (known as Illinois Youth Centers or "IYCs") and fostering accountability and transparency through public reporting. The number of incarcerated youth in the state system has been significantly reduced since its inception, from 700 across six facilities in 2015, to less than 150 in five IYCs run by the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) as of April 2023.

However, the average daily count of approximately 416 youth in county detention centers, based on aggregate information from the February 2022 Monthly Data Report published by the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission, illustrates the urgency of expanding the OIJO's reach to the many youth in these facilities who do not have access to the support and assistance currently available to youth in state custody.

Every young person in custody is entitled to access to a trusted adult, knowledgeable about the system, capable of obtaining information, communicating confidentially, and playing a critical role in safeguarding youth who are in conflict with the criminal legal system, which can be a traumatic experience. SB2197 strives to ensure that youth understand their rights and that they are fully observed, and to assist in seeking services for these youths and their families in need of help.

Existing oversight of county juvenile facilities is limited and insufficiently designed to focus on protecting and assisting youth. It is best practice to have an independent body, like the Ombudsman, conduct the oversight while maintaining regular communication with detained youth and regularly providing publicly available reports. The expansion of the OIJO's jurisdiction will provide a much-needed independent source of information about how our youth are treated in county facilities and the challenges they face.

We are aware of no opposition to the bill. We have worked diligently with various stakeholders on this bill, and have integrated amendments that resolved concerns from entities such as the Illinois Probation and Court Services Association and Illinois Sheriffs Association. We have also postponed the

effective date of the bill to allow the Department of Juvenile Justice sufficient time to collaborate with the General Assembly in order to obtain the necessary appropriation. JHA stands ready to assist in advocating for those resources (which are estimated to be under \$1 million on an annual basis) in the FY2025 state budget.

JHA respectfully requests your support for this significant piece of legislation. By signing SB2197 into law, we can ensure more robust protection for our state's justice-involved youth and reaffirm our collective commitment to their rights and welfare. Thank you for your commitment to protecting youth and the continued reform of the juvenile justice system.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Vollen-Katz
Executive Director, John Howard Association
jvollen@thejha.org
Phone: 331-264-4081