

July 1, 2024

Cuyahoga County Council

Juvenile Court Advisory Subcommittee – Public Testimony

The Honorable Ronald Adrine, *Member*

The Honorable Robert McClelland, *Member*

Marvin Cross, *Member*

Bridget Gibbons, *Member*

Jennifer Blumhagen Yarham, *Member*



Thank you, members of the Juvenile Court Advisory Subcommittee. My name is Cyan Blackwell, and I am the Youth Justice Policy Associate at the Children's Law Center. We are a non-profit legal services center protecting the rights of children and youth in the child welfare, justice, and education systems so they can grow up in safe and healthy ways. We achieve this mission through direct legal assistance, policy reform, and community education. I am based in Cleveland, and I work statewide to improve how young people are served by the juvenile and adult legal systems.

Today, I would like to highlight a few priority opportunities to better serve our county's justice-involved youth. I'm confident members of this Committee share the belief that youth safety and well-being is vital to our County's overall health and wellness. Supporting children's healthy development must also include a commitment to preventing youth from entering the justice system and from going into the deepest ends of that system.

A recently published series on Cleveland.com titled, "Delinquent: Our System, Our Kids," featured 30 stories of life inside Cuyahoga County's juvenile justice system through the eyes of the kids who have experienced it first-hand.¹ These stories highlighted the many ways that Cuyahoga County is an outlier in this state. Our county consistently leads the state in the number of youths detained pending trial, the number of youths committed to the state's youth prison system, and the number of youths transferred to the adult court system. Moreover, over two-thirds of youth in Cuyahoga County's juvenile justice system have had prior child welfare involvement, meaning they already experienced abuse, neglect, or significant trauma.²

Recently, the Governor created a special workgroup on juvenile justice to conduct a thorough, holistic review and issue recommendations for improvement to address the pervasive problems plaguing the Ohio's justice-involved youth.³ Our county should likewise commit to conducting a thorough examination of Cuyahoga County's County Juvenile Court and Detention Center to ensure children are safe and have access to appropriate education and trauma-informed behavioral health and other supports.

¹ Durbin, Kaitlin and John Tucker, *Delinquent: Our System, Our Kids* (June 17, 2024), available: <https://www.cleveland.com/news/2024/06/delinquent-our-system-our-kids-30-stories-of-life-inside-cuyahoga-countys-juvenile-justice-system.html>

² ⁴ Tatem Kelley, Barbara and Haskins, Paul A., *Dual System Youth: At the Intersection of Child Maltreatment and Delinquency*, National Institute of Justice (August 10, 2021) available: <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/dual-system-youth-intersection-child-maltreatment-and-delinquency>

³ ⁴ USA Today Network Ohio, *Kids Behind Bars: Chaos, violence, and neglect plague youth prisons and detention centers*, (November 11, 2023) available: <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/2023/11/11/ohios-youth-prison-detention-centers-struggle-with-injuries-neglect/70410221007/>

Our County must also be committed to ensuring that no child faces this system and these potential consequences without competent, qualified, and robust defense counsel. A report released in by the Wren Collective in December 2023 has raised serious concerns about our Juvenile Court's indigent defense system and the quality of representation provided to this vulnerable population.⁴ A recent review of the Juvenile Court's assigned counsel list revealed that at least 41 attorneys have been deemed unqualified – indicating that many of our kids have likely been assigned unqualified attorneys.⁵

We also need to do more to keep our young people from even entering our juvenile justice system by investing in more prevention efforts like JDAI (Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative) and the EIDC (Early Intervention and Diversion Center)—these justice system efforts strive to prevent youth from going deeper into the system. I would like to commend our Juvenile Court for its work to expand diversion and include stakeholders in alternatives to detention initiatives.

I would also like to thank the County Council for creating this subcommittee. We have a unique opportunity to assess and improve in these areas. I urge this subcommittee to engage with diverse group of stakeholders to encourage system collaboration, identify priorities for urgent improvement, and to invest in relational supports that foster connection, healing, and restorative experiences for our young people.

Investing in the success of our justice-involved youth not only helps their successful growth into adulthood but also bolsters our community at large. Thank you for your time and attention to these concerns.

Respectfully submitted,

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⁴ The Wren Collective, *Gideon at Sixty: Advancing the Right to Counsel for Kids in Cuyahoga County*, Dec. 2023

⁵ Livingston, Doug and Rachel Dissell, *Kids Assigned Unqualified Attorneys in Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court* (June 28, 2024), available: <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/06/28/kids-assigned-unqualified-attorneys-in-cuyahoga-county-juvenile-court>