

Juvenile Law Center's Advocates for Youth Justice, Testimony for the Judiciary Committee Hearing on
the Juvenile Justice Reforms

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a hearing to discuss the recommendations suggested by the bipartisan Juvenile Justice Task Force. My name is Angela Landy. I am 23 years old and I spent two years of my life in juvenile justice placements.

My colleagues and I from Advocates For Youth Justice, an advocacy group with the Juvenile Law Center, are working to inform legislators that we need to keep kids out of prisons. This year specifically, we are trying to address the need for more programs for kids as good alternatives before incarceration. These alternative programs help because they keep kids out of prison and keep them connected to their families and to better education outside prisons. My experience relates to this issue because I was once in a placement, and I felt so closed in. I don't wish that on anybody and so I feel youth should have another chance such as a program instead of getting locked away. Youth should have the opportunity to stay connected to their supportive family and have the opportunity to build their future through a stable education.

Placement isn't something a kid should go through, especially for small stuff. When I was younger, my parents thought they didn't know how to handle some of my behavior. They didn't know where else to turn to get help or support. Being able to talk with my parents with a counselor would have helped my situation. Family counseling would have helped a lot. I missed out on time with my family and growing up with my family because I didn't have that resource. It is so important to be able to grow up in a normal setting with regular school, and with family and friends. Being able to be with my family and speak with a counselor or therapist would have restored me and helped me grow into a different person than I am today.

I think more family-base counseling would be helpful because youth aren't getting the right education and right treatment inside of placement. Counseling is important to talk about issues and problems and then to have someone there to support you through that process would be helpful. Youth will then have the opportunities to talk out their issues and also get support to continue the positive things they are doing and that they want to do.

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Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a hearing to discuss the recommendations suggested by the bipartisan Juvenile Justice Task Force. My name is Bree I am 24, pronouns are they/them. I've been a part of JLC for almost 6 years and I was in the justice system for about 2 months.

Alternatives help youth more and are better than incarcerating youth because if a youth is having drug or alcohol problems then the alternative for that is drug or alcohol program. If a youth got arrested for fighting instead of putting them away, put them in an anger management program or class. There are other alternatives then just putting these youth away.

When I was put in the JJ system, I got arrested for fighting the first time. I don't believe what I really needed was for them to put me in an anger management program instead of putting me away. If I would have gotten that instead of being arrested and put away in the system, then maybe mentally I would have been a lot better and not going through trauma all over again. Getting arrested was a traumatic experience for me and especially because it was my first time.

They took me away from my home. My mom didn't really have any idea what was going on until I was taken away. Coming home from being incarcerated, it kind of gave me a feeling of, you know, not feeling safe. I didn't have an opportunity to be able to understand why everything happened. Nothing was explained to me.

Programs that help for anger management, therapy, drug or alcohol programs, grief and loss groups, suicide and or depression classes or groups and other mental health resources are all great alternatives. These must be provided for youth first.

I believe offering these alternatives will help a lot of youth because a lot of youth are entering the juvenile justice system may already have mental health problems and locking them up would just be a lot of stress on them. I would like to recommend our state used more alternatives such as therapy, anger management, and other kinds to help youth heal first, instead of putting them away, especially if it is their first offense.

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Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a hearing to discuss the recommendations suggested by the bipartisan Juvenile Justice Task Force. My name is Anahi M, I am 22, years old. I was in the Child Welfare system before I entered the Juvenile Justice system.

Alternatives help people better than just incarcerating a youth because they're just being placed in a holding cell. I believe alternatives can help each individual youth in their own way. Alternatives should be in place when the crime is small.

Being in placement makes it harder for youth than actually helping them. I don't know why people just want to lock us up. There's no real mental health services or support when youth get there. It doesn't solve our problems. It creates more. Instead, it seems more like a system that is more about getting money for having kids in placement than using the funds to help the young person.

Being in these placements creates a bigger hole for youth. It leaves us with more problems than before we went in. Instead, there should be more investment in community programs because there's not a lot of resources in our community that kids have access to. If you did this, it would give youth more access to programs that would help them better than just locking them up,

If you were to invest in the actual community, there would be changes you can actually see. I believe there should be a process for child welfare and the juvenile justice system to follow up with youth in group placements and ensure there are appropriate services in place to ensure our education is not impacted, and our emotional well-being is intact, this would not only help youth it would help the community. Youth should get access to mental health support, help in the community, and it could keep kids from being locked up or from us being in group and residential placements too long.

If I got the support system of my family I would have probably stayed with my adopted parents. Being taken away from adoptive parents no one tried to see why I was upset, they just removed me from the home. Someone could have connected us with family services like therapy to keep me with my family.

There should be alternatives. What happens when a youth gets locked up? Nothing, they're placed in a holding cell majority of the time. No plans are set for youth when they're incarcerated. They don't offer support to the youth. What is the point of incarcerating them?

We need more alternatives. We need to stop locking kids up.

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Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a hearing to discuss the recommendations suggested by the bipartisan Juvenile Justice Task Force. My name is Amara Coles. I am 23 years old, and I was in foster care for about 5 years. I have experience in both the justice and foster care systems.

Youth incarceration is not the solution. Youth incarceration doesn't give youth the support they need. The reasons why some youths are incarcerated doesn't make sense. Some youths are sent away for truancy based on whatever reason they were not able to go to school, which forces them to be taken out of school, or to drop out because of the system. Often, I've seen that youth end up back in jail again, repeating the same cycle again being incarcerated. When you return home, some schools won't accept you after you've left the school. After that, youth have to turn to other options like night school or being left out of school altogether. Furthermore, youth often end back into trouble again, or locked up because they're supposed to be in school.

In my personal experience in the system, it hurt my feelings for an adult to say that they didn't believe me. They didn't believe me; they always believe children are the problem. I wasn't in the wrong. When you defend yourself does not mean that you're wrong? I was labeled as the "troubled" teen. I was never suspended, I had straight As, but I got into one fight, and I watched everything I worked hard for get thrown away. I had a foster parent tell me "If I had my daughter fight you, who do you think they would believe, you or me?" I was planning on going to college, where I could go away, live in dorms, travel, and enjoy my life. I didn't want to have to worry about anything. The system took me out of school, it messed up my GPA. All my favorite teachers disliked me after that, I had issues when I tried to go back to my school. I went from going to a charter school to a public school. It was a different experience, I was uncomfortable. Charter schools had a different set of discipline versus a public school.

While I was incarcerated something I noticed was when I did ask to speak to the therapist it took a long time for me to see her. I had to send a card then it took a few days to hear back. Then after they finally got back to me, they had to walk me to the office, this was after many days of me seeing the therapist walk by my room every day and not stopping in to see me.

There are much better alternatives to youth incarceration. There should be more community-based programs like Big Brother & Big Sister, where youth can have mentors to help youth get back on track and keep young people out of trouble. Youth need people to check in on them, help them sign them up for programs they want to be involved in, and to help them get resources to things they need that DHS isn't offering to them or forgetting to offer. Community-based programs help keep kids and youth busy and a lot of them are not expensive but, things like, art programs, music, sports, should be free for families. Non-profits organizations get funding, donations so it should be offered for free to youth, especially for youth in need. DHS has a lot of funding; the question is what are they doing with the funding? You all need to investigate this.

Having community-based programs will give youth a chance and better the community. It keeps kids and youth out of trouble, it means more opportunities. Having a youth participate in one of these these programs could be life changing, maybe they might group up to be singer, or good basketball player. It's keeping the streets clean in a way and we'll being doing a service to all kids in both the juvenile justice

and foster care systems. No one really wants to see kids caught up with the system when they can be in school, or having a mentor tell them that's not the way to go. Youth need people who believe in them and who are saying, you can be anything, you could stay out of trouble; someone who can help them get on a better path, so we see less teens getting killed.

What happened to schools keeping kids in detention or summer school? Incarceration for the kids has art classes, and a few other activities but youth are not even engaging with these things before they get incarcerated. If we were not pushing to help kids get and be better, and have healthy mental health before they get into prison, why would you spend more money to offer that in prison? We need to help our youth first when they are home.

Outside of incarceration, I had a good social worker so I didn't have to worry about experiencing homelessness or being in a group home where I could have potentially got into fights with other girls. The Achieving Independence Center is a great program that taught me a bunch of life skills that I needed.

It is time we do something to really help youth. We need better alternatives. We need to care about youth and not just keep locking them up.

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Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a hearing to discuss the recommendations suggested by the bipartisan Juvenile Justice Task Force. My name is Jihid. I am 23 years old. I have been in and out of placement since I was 15 years old. This is my third year as an advocate in Juveniles for Justice at JLC.

The last time I went to court I really saw how the system didn't see me as an individual. When I was in court the judge didn't like me, she never liked me. I think it was because out of a group of 12, I was the only one who didn't take the plea deal and decided to take mine to trial. She said if I got arrested when I was 18, she could have given me 30 years for this. I said to her 'why do you got to talk to me like that.' She was treating me like a criminal before I was even convicted. At the time, I couldn't really say nothing on my own because I had a public defender. They were talking for me at the time because they don't let you speak for yourself. The court lets other people talk for you, then when other people talk for you, they don't know what you're thinking. So, they think they know what you're saying, but they really don't. They are trying do what's best for you, but they really are working together, instead of working with the kid. They also always bring up the plea deal before you're even in the courtroom, making you feel trapped.

When I entered the system, I realized how bad health care in the system is and mental health care is even worse. If a young person already has mental health problems already, but the staff doesn't know about it, it could get worse if you don't know how to help them. A young person usually must take a certain medicine when they get in a facility, and they're forced to take pills because they don't know how to cope with the experience. When they're forced to take their pills, the staff don't know how to help them because they haven't always been trained to help someone taking that kind of medication. Sometimes things become unsafe when youth in the system try to take medication from the other youth and abuse them, because there isn't enough security keeping track. They could offer actual therapy too, and not have someone who works in the facility doing it, work with people who are certified and want to support people like us who need help.

I did not have my documents and school transcripts. I was required to take a test that would determine my class/status.

My experience in the system has also severely impacted my education. Because I was expelled in the school district in Philly, I couldn't go to any school in Philly. When I was applying to homeschool, the facility didn't have my records and the school didn't have my records and they said they faxed it over. I already knew what that meant - they lost it; they didn't do anything with it. So, I had to go to my middle school for the records. Because I was in Delaware at the time of middle school, I had to take a test and if I passed the test, they would put me in the right grade. I finally passed when I was in my senior year, but that was my whole year.

When I returned there was a lack of opportunities. Before I got involved in my situation, I was part of many activities. I couldn't go back to the same school, I wound up being homeschooled in the house, 24/7. No programs, etc. I used to be outside every day on the basketball court. I still play now, but I'm not into it how I used to be. I was in the house, log on, log out, no programs, 24/7 every day. When you are transferred to a box, then to another box, and you keep transferring to the same sized box. So that put me

in a state to be by myself most of the time and I had no problem being in confined places now. I don't mind being in a little box now. Claustrophobic is okay, I won't be affected now. Space isn't needed, I could be in my room all day, sunup to sundown.

Deep down inside, that feeling will live inside you, then that puts you in a mood to just chill and not do anything. That's when you get the laziness to just stay in the little box, because all you know is to chill because you spent months away by yourself because you don't know how to do anything else, but what they tell you to do. There were no programs and no resources being in the house all day.

I almost gave up doing the homeschool, but I didn't mind in the first and second quarter, and I was doing good. However, after being in the house 24/7, it was affecting me. Even though we had daylight, that's when I started slacking so then I thought, I want to get out of house arrest, so I started violating again. My PO encouraged me to keep working hard because I was doing good. When I did get in school, I almost missed my graduation because I was under house arrest. I almost didn't go to my graduation until I asked my PO and my PO helped me to go. I had to get people to advocate for me. Juvenile Law Center, and the program managers, Ms. Marcia, and Ms. Cathy advocated for me. They showed up, they were working with me at the time. It felt good to have that support. Everyone needs support. I had to get a lot of validation to go outside because of my restrictions. It felt good to have that support system after having so many people push you down. I almost gave up with completing the homeschooling, but I completed it because I wanted to meet my requirements and be free of the system.

We need better options for youth that don't send them to placement. I went it has impacted the rest of my life.

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My name is Aqilah. I am 21 years old. This is my fifth year serving as an advocate with Juveniles for Justice at the Juvenile Law Center.

I first entered the child welfare system at age 15. It was a long, horrible journey. I've been bounced around through a few juvenile youth residential treatment facilities. I've had workers assigned to me through DHS and the courts. To this day I feel like I've encountered so many harmful and traumatic events while in the child welfare systems. I was expelled in the 11th grade due to truancy, ODD, and feeling frustrated with things happening in my life. After being expelled, I was sent to an alternative school, on probation, and later forced to go to a juvenile placement because of a GPS violation. When I got to the juvenile holding facility, no one notified the alternative, so they did not know I was in placement and constantly marked me absent while I was in the juvenile facility.

They held me at the juvenile holding facility until a placement became available. Finally placed at an official placement I suffered from depression, and I felt spiritless. I met with a psychiatrist there who I explained to that I was having trouble sleeping and was always sad. I was glad to talk to anyone because I just wanted to express to someone how things were making me feel while I was at a residential treatment placement. The placement prescribed me medicine as a child, that was too high in dosage and made me lightheaded, dizzy and made me throw up. I told this to my Philly CUA worker who then told me the medicine was for my own good. So, I told the psychiatrist I did not feel the medicine was making me feel better, I made a mistake telling her because this only led to them increasing the medication they were giving me throughout my whole stay. I gained weight and I am scared of medicine to this day as an effect.

While at placement I felt I had to advocate for myself a lot, including attending a school off-grounds from the placement; a local community school where I had to be tested and was accepted. I was glad because the placement school was horrible. I was discharged from the placement at age 18. I did not leave with the documents that I needed like my school documents, my health records, or vital docs. I had to find my vital documents on my own. The placement or the local public school never gave me my diploma, so I had no proof that I graduated from high school.

There was no aftercare support after I left placement. No one talked to me about my safety when I got home. I wish I had more support to prepare for college or had someone who could have guaranteed my educational transition would be successful. Also, any mental wellness support and medications that were started in placement needed to be continued but when youth leave, there is no person ensuring anything. We need protection and someone youth could go to file complaints and get accurate information on who is supposed to help and report when people are not supporting them. I could have used this office when I was over medicated, and when I didn't receive appropriate support in placement, and when I left. No child or youth should have to do this alone, but I did. I was a kid, I deserved better. To expect that youth who go to placement will experience success and complete school is unrealistic because youth are not given enough guidance support. We need better options.