

Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force
Roundtable with Girls in the Bureau of Juvenile Justice Services' North Central Secure Treatment Unit
February 16, 2021

On February 16, 2021, the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force conducted a remote, web-based roundtable discussion by video conference with three girls incarcerated at the Bureau of Juvenile Justice Services' North Central Secure Treatment Unit in Danville, Pennsylvania. The meeting was facilitated by Task Force member Jon Rubin, deputy secretary of the Office of Children, Youth, and Families at the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. Task Force members in attendance included Judge Kim Berkeley Clark, president judge of the family division of the Family Division of 5th judicial district, Rick Steele, executive director of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judges' Commission (JCJC), Rep. Mike Zabel, Jim Anderson, former executive director of JCJC, and Dan Jurman, executive director of the Office of Advocacy and Reform. Anna Malcein King, executive director of the House Executive Director, Children & Youth Committee, attended on behalf of Task Force member and committee chair Rep. Sheryl Delozier.

➤ ***Strengths of the Juvenile Justice System:***

- **Youth say the BJJS secure facility offers structure and treatment not provided elsewhere:** The girls each stated the positive and helpful programming at the BJJS secure facility was unlike the experiences they had in their prior years in the juvenile justice system. "I feel like there is a lot of structure here," one said. "There are basic expectations in everyday life. People have a problem with [the rule of] turning the lights out, but everything is for a reason." The girls described a variety of programs they felt were implemented well, in contrast to other juvenile justice out-of-home placements to which they had been sent, such as life skills, Thinking for Change, and programs or groups that address Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and substance use. "It's sad that a secure lock down place has to take you to really get treatment," one girl said, adding, "that's because the other placements didn't have treatment like they have treatment here." The girls stated an appreciation for study halls and "Sunday selfcare" during which they have time to have their nails done and do other activities. One youth stated, "they got some good food here!" 18-year-old girl spoke of being able to receive her GED after failing to receive an education during her seven years in the system. "I had been in and out-of-home placements so I never really attended school," she said. "I wanted to get my GED and I reached my goal." She stated she is now awaiting a reply to her application to college. Another youth stated, "This program has helped me out tremendously. But there is always room for improvement."
- **The youth feel safe, due in part to attitudes and efforts by BJJS facility staff:** The girls each stated they feel safe in the facility. One said, "time goes by fast here. This is the safest place I've never been to. I've been to a lot of placements in six and a half years." The girls praised facility staff for their fairness and ability to de-escalate situations in the BJJS facility. "When you're upset, they'll be able to identify what's wrong with you," one girl said. The youth carry "safety cards," which one youth said "are good because new staff come in and it says our triggers, our warning sign, or supports." Youth said they appreciated that staff practice the same life skills principles in their work that the youth are required to learn in programming.

➤ **Areas in Need of Improvement:**

- **The three youth spent most of the adolescence under court supervision, in and out of placements, leading to “institutionalization”:** The three girls—one from a large urban county and two from midsized counties— were 17 or nearly 18 and had each spent the majority of their teenage years in the juvenile justice system and in and out of out-of-home placements—a combination of placements for delinquency and other systems such as mental health. One youth said, “I was first locked up at age 11. Growing up, I wasn’t really in the best environments. ... So I wound up getting locked up for stealing stuff at the store. The first place I went was [a juvenile justice out-of-home placement].” She said she was subsequently sent to seven other juvenile justice facilities, in addition to her current BJS secure stint. “People are so institutionalized [and] used to being in placement,” she said. “I don’t want that for people. I’m 18—it’s too late for me, but it’s not too late for other people. I want people to be able to live successful lives in their community.” Another girl, age 17, said she had been in the BJS secure facility twice, first for two-and-a-half years and now for nine months. Reacting to data from the Task Force showing nearly three-quarters of youth are sent to placement on their first adjudicated offense, another girl said, “you’re just institutionalizing us. You’re just giving us more problems than we had.” One girl said in her years of cycling through out-of-home placements, she had “learned to live in an institution but not as a person in the world.”
- **Youth are kept in the system and routinely removed from home for what they view as minor technical violations:** When asked why they were in the system for so long and whether they knew how to successfully get out, the girls described as routine being sent to placement for behavior that their juvenile probation officer (JPO) or the court viewed as a violation of supervision but not a new offense. “It’s easy to get into the system but it’s harder to get out,” one girl said, adding that the system did not provide her any clear sense of how to complete her obligations to get off supervision. “Personally, I feel like once you get in, for me they didn’t tell me exactly what I needed,” she said. Another girl described her view of their system in terms of fairness and incentives. “I’ve been hearing this since the time I got locked up: we are money to everyone. Being in the system, everyone makes money off us. So one little violation is sending us [to out-of-home placement] ... I got violated for letting my pregnant friend sleep at my grandma’s house and my grandma told my JPO ... and I got put all over. They don’t give us a chance. ... they need to have some faith in us. A lot of people are quick to judge me when I go to placements and stuff.” A youth said she was locked up because “I had appointments, but I couldn’t go because of COVID.” One youth said she felt that such technical violations should not lead to removal from the home and should instead trigger other alternatives, adding, “I think there could have been a lot of options. I just had a violation. I don’t think secure [out-of-home placement] for a violation is the right idea.”
- **Youth say they are sent to out-of-home placement on a first offense, without treatment in the community:** Youth said they regularly saw kids removed from home on their first offense. None of the youth described receiving any nonresidential treatment prior to out-of-home placement. “We don’t have resources before we go in [to out-of-home placement],” one said. “I guess it’s the normal for us to act up because of where we’re from, so the first time we act up, we get a charge.” Another girl said, “I feel like kids where I’m from actually is scared to go forth and ask for help because they’re scared they’re going to get taken out of their homes or something,”

adding that youth could be more engaged with treatment in the community “if people are not so much judgmental and offer more services like wraparound services and not be judgmental and not go straight to putting us out the house.” The girl later added, “It’s just redundant because they don’t ever provide. They can never provide any solutions because of where I live. They say they don’t want me [to live] in Philly, but all I know is Philly. But how do I know if you don’t give me that chance? Why you going to take me out of Philly just to put me back in?” Another girl said she was in a facility through the mental health system to address her needs but when she was charged with an offense there, the court sent her directly to a juvenile justice placement—due, she felt, to the stigma of her mental health diagnosis. “They look at your background and then they do that,” she said, adding “I think they don’t want to deal with us.”

- **In contrast to the BJS facility, the girls said juvenile justice out-of-home placements are not safe and do not provide them with effective treatment or education:** Asking by the Task Force about their experiences in out-of-home placements outside of their current BJS-run facility, the girls said placements to which they had been sent for delinquency were not safe, were not clean, and did not provide effective treatment or education. One girl said of other residential placements, “It’s not safe at all. Residential [placement], they can do whatever they want. ... They jump people. It’s not safe at all.” Another said, “a lot of these facilities are not clean. They are dirty. People are more stressed out in a dirty environment. How can I focus on what I need to when there are rats and stink bugs?” The girls described educational environments in out-of-home placements where they were not educated—and even then, their credits were sometimes invalid and did not transfer when they returned home. “I’ve been to a placement where they do kindergarten work and you can color and they say you can get credit, but you don’t get credit,” one girl said. Speaking of staff at privately run out-of-home placements, one girl said both education and treatment were inadequate. “It’s like they really did not care. In school, I swear, they would give me, like, adding or subtracting problems. They had the same classrooms for everybody doing the same work and we’re all at different levels. We’re doing second grade work. You can just walk out of class and do whatever you want. Same goes for the treatment. They didn’t know what do when a problem came about. So it’s like, every little thing turned into a big thing. They didn’t know how to calm somebody down or interact with the kids. They would be on their phones and didn’t really pay attention to us. ... It wasn’t really a learning-based environment.”
- **Youth are aware that providers reject them from programs and that they are not wanted:** The girls raised, unprompted, their awareness of the fact that service providers can reject them from admittance into a program for any reason. The youth described an understanding that they were unwanted by these programs and that that posed an obstacle to receiving and completing treatment and to extricating themselves from the juvenile justice system. One girl said she felt her history led to provider rejections simply based on the amount of paperwork in her case. “I know no placement in the state will take me, but I need mental health treatment,” she said, adding, “People don’t accept you or they look at you in a different kind of way. They don’t even go to interview you. They literally see a stack of papers. They don’t even read it and then they say, ‘I don’t want her.’ ... I don’t understand that. That’s so messed up. I don’t understand that.” One Task Force member inquired whether the youth had been asked by the court where they wanted to live, but in response, a girl said that by the time she was asked, so many out-of-home placement providers had rejected her that it was too late to use her own agency because she

was certain to be denied. “I have had so many placements that I recommended myself to be placed at and they denied me,” she said, adding, “They waited so long to finally ask me ... The placement where I actually wanted to be placed at is not going to accept me.”

- **Sending youth far from home strains families:** The girls said being sent to out-of-home placements means they hardly ever see their family members, who often live far away. One girl some youth do family therapy while in placement, but that is not the case for her and her 70-year-old grandmother, who cannot drive far distances. Because [the courts] are always so fast to put you far away, so it’s hard for my grandma to come see me so I don’t really have any family therapy.” She said she gets only get “10 or 15 minutes” to Zoom with their families “once every two weeks,” but regarding her grandmother, “I don’t really have Zoom calls with her.”
- **Youth with mental health diagnoses or who are victims of abuse, neglect, or dependency also felt those systems were “quick to throw you away”:** When asked if they had prior experience in the child welfare system as victims of abuse, neglect or dependency, youth described experiences with other systems in largely negative terms, indicating those systems removed them from home too quickly just as they felt the juvenile justice system had. One girl—who described later being placed in eight facilities for delinquency—said she had been in foster care since the age of three “so when I got in the juvenile justice system, I already had [Department of Human Services] workers. I feel like they’re so quick to throw you away.” In response to the same question, another girl, who had had a child welfare caseworker since age 13 and also been in the delinquency system for nearly as long, said, “I feel like I’ve been in and out of so many step down programs and group homes everywhere and that it has affected me. I have social anxiety. I feel like I can’t function in society. I’ve never had a job. I don’t know how to take care of myself and now I’m an adult.”
- **Some girls feel their court review hearings were not fair and that they did not have a voice:** When asked if they felt their court hearings were fair and that they were heard, one girl said no “A lot of the courts, you go in, they ask how you’re doing and then it’s done,” she said. “You don’t get a chance to say anything else.” She said, “They have so many people on their case and they just want to get in and get out. WE go in there, they hear something, you’re done. They don’t really give you the benefit of the doubt, they don’t really hear what you gotta say. I don’t feel like it matters to them. In Philadelphia, we don’t have a choice. We don’t have a voice. We’re just another set of papers. They just really look at the papers.” A girl from another county felt it was a mixed bag. “We have some judges who don’t want to hear anything and other judges who will listen too much and will maybe feel bad for the kid,” she said. “It’s a fine line – yeah you don’t want to completely disregard the person’s feelings but at the same time we have to be aware and this person needs help.” All three youth said their defense attorney did not help them understand the court proceedings. One youth said, “Honestly, my attorney would call me up five minutes before my court and say, ‘this is what’s going to happen, do you have questions?’ How am I supposed to ask all the question I need to ask when I have five minutes? And then I wouldn’t hear from him again until the next court hearing.”

➤ **Notable quotes:**

- On the court’s quickness to remove youth from home:
 - *“I feel like sometimes it’s like, ‘she’s from this neighborhood [so] her parents are this.’ ... If I get one misdemeanor charge and they send me to a 9-12 month program and*

because of my parents and everything else, maybe I slipped up one time, it doesn't mean I have to go away for 12 months."

- On the lack of clarity in privately-run out-of-home placements for what youth need to do to complete the program and return home:
 - *"A lot of other placements aren't goal oriented or solution-based. I'm literally here doing nothing. I can speak to my therapist all day long but if I don't have a goal nothing is changing."*
- On how the BJJS secure facility encourages the girls to set clear goals to complete them:
 - *"We set goals for the week and look at our strength and weaknesses. That's helped a lot because before I didn't know my goals, but now I can complete them in 3.5 months. And that progress will show the judge."*