

**Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force
County Commissioners Roundtable
September 29, 2020**

On September 29, 2020, the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force held a county commissioner roundtable discussion with over 20 participants, including county commissioners, chief juvenile probation officers, juvenile probation officers, and leadership from the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania. The roundtable was facilitated by Commissioner Steven Guccini, a Task Force member and Pike County commissioner.

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

- **Pennsylvania has made significant improvements to its system through coordination and collaboration to send fewer youth to out-of-home placement and divert lower-risk youth:** Participants discuss that juvenile justice in Pennsylvania has, as one put it, “taken a giant leap forward in progressive approaches ... [away] from being one that was heavily reliant on institutional placements.” A participant stated that as opposed to years past, “we’re trying not to have the lower-risk kids involved and ... the majority of our resources should go toward the most difficult kids.” As one participant stated, “Pennsylvania is one of the top states in the country for its juvenile justice system.”
- **Pennsylvania has worked to expand community-based alternatives and implement other evidence-based practices:** Participants discussed the ways in which the juvenile justice system has worked to expand the continuum of alternatives to out-of-home placement available to judges and probation officers in the community. Another participant said the use of assessments and Pennsylvania’s Balanced and Restorative Justice principles had guided the system in better matching’s the intensity of the system’s response to a youth’s risks and needs. “The strides should be noted,” he said, adding, “we’ve done a good job of matching evidence-based practices to the level of need of the kids.”

➤ ***Areas in Need of Improvement:***

- **Youth at low risk to reoffend are often moved into the juvenile justice system as a “last resort” to address behavioral or mental health diagnoses:** Participants discussed their view that youth are being moved into the juvenile justice system not because they are likely to commit a new offense but rather because they have mental health diagnoses or are victims of abuse, neglect, or dependency and the systems designed to address those issues are not doing so. One participant stated, “Kids who are coming into the JJ system may be low risk to reoffend, but other systems aren’t positioned to address their other needs—their behavioral health needs—their aggressiveness or other needs, so they end up in the JJ system as a system of last resort.” Another stated, “you can draw a line back from these issues to when the state slashed mental health funding by 80 million dollars.”
- **Savings from reductions in juvenile justice placements have not necessarily been reinvested back into other services for youth and families:** One participant stated that as fewer youth have been sent to placement, any state or county savings from those reductions have not always

been reinvested back into services. He said, “this whole notion that we have less kids being placed on a pretty constant curve over time is saving money there, but we aren’t necessarily taking that money and putting it into these kids with the most trauma.”

- **Private providers are permitted to turn youth away who are ordered into their custody:** One participant stated a need for a requirement that private providers funded through the juvenile justice system “don’t turn kids away.” Another said the Task Force should recommend “a requirement that [private providers] don’t turn kids away—which is a huge issue with these complex kids.”
- **Some judges do not make decisions aligned with focusing resources on the highest-risk cases:** Some participants discussed how some jurisdictions have diverted lower-risk youth from placement and from the court system, but others have not, leading to lower-risk youth ending up placement and to a lack of uniformity in judicial sentencing and other decision-making by county or by courtroom. “There are some judges who still do not follow the risk/needs assessment,” one participant stated, adding, “that’s evident in some of the data we’ve seen across the state.”
- **State fiscal structures do not provide enough funding for out-of-home placement private providers to adequately treat delinquent youth:** Some participants discussed how fiscal incentive structures in how services are provided do not reimburse counties at a high-enough rate for private providers of out-of-home placement to work with. One participant stated, “We are going to have to start to up the level of compensation for providers that are going to adequately meet the needs of those complex kids.” Another participant added, “We haven’t experienced any fiscal initiative to improve the quality of services at the high end for those kids” who do need placement.” A chief probation officer stated that while state-run facilities that cost “500 dollars a day” are “able to provide consistent staff levels,” “private providers can’t maintain staff” with their current per diem rates.
- **Probation office pay is too low:** Some participants noted that pay for juvenile probation officers is too low and should be increased.
- **At least one urban county reports increase in gun violence:** A probation chief from an urban chief stated his county has experienced an increase in gun violence that may not be present in other, more rural counties. He stated, “as we’re taking a look at the overall plan, take a look at the curriculum to address gun violence. This might not be the need for rural communities, but for [our] county, we’re seeing a lot of gang violence and gun violence that hasn’t been addressed.”

➤ **Notable quotes:**

- On the need for services that work with families:
 - “If we’re talking about funding, it’s for the kids, but we also need the effort to be for their families.”
- On the need to examine funding structures through Act 148:
 - “We’re going to have to start to up the level of compensation that are going to adequately meet the needs of the challenged kids.”