

Juvenile Justice Coalition Calls for Sweeping Reforms To Texas Juvenile Justice System

For Immediate Release

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AUSTIN — A group of juvenile justice reform advocates sent a letter today to Lt. Governor Dan Patrick and House Speaker Joe Straus calling for moving youth in state juvenile facilities to local juvenile probation, community programs, and small rehabilitative facilities closer to youth's families, and urged legislators to develop a plan to close down all state secure juvenile facilities. The request follows allegations of sexual misconduct at a Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) facility in Gainesville, Texas earlier this month.

"This is the third time in the last ten years that we've seen a crisis emerge in TJJD's facilities," said Deborah Fowler, executive director for Texas Appleseed. "This highlights what experts have been telling us for years, and what Texas-based research confirms: large facilities in remote areas cause more harm than good."

A report released in 2015 by the Council of State Governments Justice Center revealed that youth who are committed to TJJD facilities are 21 percent more likely to be rearrested, and three times more likely to commit a felony when they do reoffend, than those who are placed under supervision closer to home.

"The need for real reform is urgent," said Sharon Watkins-Jones, director of political strategies for the ACLU of Texas. "We call on the Speaker and Lieutenant Governor to create a joint committee immediately. The legislature and TJJD must chart a way forward that keeps youth safe, supported, and near their home communities."

Problems with conditions in these facilities date as far back as the 1970s, when a class of detained juveniles filed suit over civil rights violations and violent conditions in state-run youth facilities.

The reforms the coalition is calling for include shuttering remote state secure facilities in favor of alternatives closer to youths' communities, establishing standards of care for youth, preventing youth currently in state facilities from being moved into adult correctional facilities, and seeking opportunities to keep youth out of state secure facilities altogether, with a focus on those 15 and younger.

"We're calling for a solution that demonstrates our state's responsibility to ensure a safe and rehabilitative environment for all kids," said Lindsey Linder, policy attorney for the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. "Not only must we close dangerous juvenile facilities, but we must ensure that youth are not simply absorbed into the adult system, where they would be at greater risk of harm and less likely to successfully return to their families and communities."

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“It’s time to move Texas youth to safer, more effective juvenile programs closer to home,” said Lauren Rose, director of youth justice policy at Texans Care for Children. “We need policymakers to develop a plan to remove all youth from these large, isolated facilities that have proven to be ineffective and dangerous. These youth would be much better served in local juvenile probation, community programs, or small rehabilitative facilities closer to their families.”

See a copy of the letter sent to Lt. Gov. Patrick and Speaker Straus here:

<http://www.texascjc.org/system/files/publications/2017.11.30.%20Juvenile%20Justice%20Advocates%20Letter%20-%20Youth%20Assaults.pdf>

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