



March 5, 2009

Good afternoon, committee members,

First off, I would like to thank you for both the opportunity to speak to you today and for your commitment to reforming the juvenile justice system to make it better for youth in this state. When the Sunset Advisory Commission released its report on the Texas Youth Commission, the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission, and the Office of the Independent Ombudsman, my organization and many of our members were pleased to see that many of the Advisory Commission's recommendations for reform were congruent with best practices for juvenile justice systems. We had, and still have, some concerns about abolishing TYC and TJPC and transferring their functions to a newly created state agency, however.

There are several reasons we do not think consolidation is the best way to reform the Texas juvenile justice system. First, we have been very impressed by Commissioner Townsend, and we have strong faith in the efforts she is making to reform TYC. We are concerned that such a dramatic restructuring of the Youth Commission will delay the necessary improvements and reforms that are already underway. Second, while we recognize that the Advisory Commission's intention was to improve the functional performance of both agencies, we are concerned that consolidation poses the risk that funding could be diverted from youth probation services to cover the higher costs of incarcerating youth; especially over time. Additionally, it is our understanding that previous efforts to house both probation and incarceration services under one umbrella juvenile justice agency were not successful, so we are concerned about trying it again, especially at a time when there is such a strong need for successful agency reform.

If you do ultimately decide to consolidate the agencies, however, we would like to request that you recommend to the Appropriations Committee that it direct the savings that are projected as a result of consolidation to juvenile delinquency prevention and intervention programs. Such a recommendation will help ensure that any move to consolidate is based on advantages the Commission outlined in its report – better strategic planning, increased information sharing, and more integrated services – rather than to save the state money at the expense of youth and families who are in crisis and need our help.

Fifty five percent of the youth sent to the Youth Commission in 2008 had committed non-violent offenses, 32 percent were diagnosed as having serious mental health problems, 68 percent came from a "chaotic home environment," and 33 percent had a documented history of being abused or neglected. We take these figures to mean that many of the youth sent to the Youth Commission could have been prevented from entering the juvenile justice system if they had received prevention or intervention services. Some of you may be aware of the findings of a report by the Pew Center on the States that was released earlier this week: 1 in 22 adults in Texas is under

correctional control. We believe that dramatically reducing the number of kids, and ultimately adults, who end up involved in the correctional system in the first place is the best way to bring about true reform.

Thank you,

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