



NYS Public Employees Federation, ALF-CIO

Wayne Spence, President

Public Protection Joint Legislative Budget Hearing

2020-2021 Executive Budget Proposal

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Hello and thank you for your time. My name is Jennifer Voelker and I work for the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). I am a Youth Counselor I in the Buffalo Community Multi-Services Office.

I come here today to ask that you reject the Closure of the Sgt. Henry Johnson Youth Leadership Academy (YLA), as proposed in the 2020-21 Executive Budget. In the recent years, there have been many changes within the Justice System; especially within the Juvenile Justice System. Closing a juvenile justice facility during this time is not only irresponsible; but a disservice to the youth served, and the community at-large. There is a bed crunch throughout the state in the juvenile detention centers, and there are backlogs throughout the courts systems due to the newly established procedures in the judicial process, and new procedures regarding Adolescent Offenders.

The Division of Juvenile Justice Opportunities for Youth (DJJOY) work with at-risk youth that have been adjudicated through either the New York State Family Court or Youth Part of Supreme Court. DJJOY is responsible to provide facility based programming and supervision; as well as supervision of these youth in the community. Closing another facility will not only put strain on facility operations; but also community operations, as more youth will be under community supervision. This not only poses a risk for the community but does not allow for the youth to receive the necessary services in a residential setting that can help the youth to re-integrate into the community in a successful manner.

The staff in DJJOY work with these youth and provide therapeutic, educational, vocational and medical/dental services. While providing these services, the Residential staff of DJJOY are often faced with these youth's maladaptive behaviors; which are both aggressive and assaultive in nature. Staff are being mandated to stay and work overtime due to needing coverage. Some staff are covering responsibilities of that are not

part of their job duties in order to provide the services for which that these youth need and are placed. Another closure of an OCFS facility means more overtime, more over worked staff, and more youth for these staff to provide services for and manage. As stated before, the community services would also be impacted – as more youth will be on Aftercare supervision. The case loads are already upwards of 15 in some offices, as more youth are released due to the lack of beds, Community Youth Counselor I will have an increased caseload, and less time that they can provide crucial services to the youth in the care of OCFS.

The Executive Budget proposes a decrease of 63 positions in OCFS, mostly through attrition and from YLA. These positions are needed within DJJOY. With the changes that have been made since the enactment of Raise the Age, it is still projected that OCFS will see an increase of youth coming into care and custody through the court system. Courts are starting to see a rise in the number of appearances of Violations of Probation, and a number of these appearances are Adolescent Offenders. Losing positions would decrease the amount of services being provided to the youth that are in OCFS custody – both in facility and out.

There is a proposal on the table as well, to move the Adolescent Offenders who have been currently held in an AO facility maintained by the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. The proposal is to move the youth into OCFS facilities by October of this year, thus adding more youth to the care and custody of DJJOY facilities and possibly community supervision. Staff will also need to be trained in new procedures regarding AO's, the laws regarding AO's, etc. Due to this population being older, and having committed more serious crimes, new safety measures will have to be put in place in both the facility and the community.

Staff already face a multitude of unsafe situations while working with these youth. Whether it be being bitten, physically assaulted, having bodily fluids thrown at them, etc. Losing positions and facilities

will exacerbate the safety risk that working with these young people pose, as well as working with the AO population. Community workers already face dangers of working in communities that are known for violence, entering homes that are unsuitable, and working with youth that are involved with gangs. I myself have had youth with whom I was supervising in the community come after me with scissors, a knife and then a piece of floorboard from his home. I have also been at a youth's home within hours of him being shot. I have had youth with sexually harmful behaviors that I worked with tell their treatment team that they cannot be released, as they know they will re-offend. The list can go on about the unsafe situations that both OCFS staff in facility and community could face; and losing bed space and staff positions contribute to the unsafe conditions for the individuals that are tasked with helping these youth change their behavior and successfully re-enter the community.

Closing Sgt. Henry Johnson Youth Leadership Academy will put a strain on a system that is working with the youth of NYS. It will lessen the chance for a youth, especially an at-risk young male, to receive the necessary services to reintegrate into his home community in a successful and productive manner. I believe that it is premature to close any OCFS facilities and to lose any positions within DJJOY, as the new judicial and juvenile justice systems are evolving. There is already a bed shortage for youth that are pending adjudication, and some of those youth will be coming to OCFS, and the state needs to be ready for them – be proactive instead of reactive.

I thank you for your time and consideration into my comments. Please remember to reject the closing of YLA, and keep the services that the youth and families of NYS have expected to and deserve to receive intact.