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An inexcusable and costly failure to fund juvenile review boards

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For years, legislators sang the praises of juvenile review boards, because community-based JRBs helped kids succeed more frequently— and more cheaply – than the juvenile justice system. But when the General Assembly moved juvenile justice from one state agency to another, it neglected to move the funding for JRBs that serve our largest cities.

That means fewer second chances and fewer essential services – mainly for young people of color and from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our state frequently cannot find the money to support these youth, though the funding for the more expensive strategies of prosecution and even incarceration is never in short supply.

Connecticut has seen a steady decrease in cases referred to juvenile court in recent years, resulting in a much smaller juvenile justice system. Our larger cities, Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven and Waterbury, have all seen steady reductions in the number of youth who are referred to juvenile court for misdemeanor offenses. The downsized system has garnered Connecticut a reputation as a pro-reform state.

The unsung heroes of this success are juvenile review boards. In our cities, JRBs see the largest number of youth, often dealing with the most serious social, emotional and trauma-based issues. What our big city JRBs have been able to do over the last 5 years has been impressive.

Between 2013 and 2017, misdemeanor referrals to court fell 28 percent in Bridgeport, 47 percent in Hartford, 46 percent in New Haven and 42 percent in Waterbury. The majority of children diverted from court in these cities have been children of color, which is especially important given the significant disproportionality impacting children of color being referred into the system.

You would think programs like this that do such a fantastic job diverting youth of color, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, out of the system would be cherished and protected. Instead, during the last legislative session, these programs and the youth they serve were essentially thrown under the bus in a way that defies logic.

Almost 80 youth service bureaus operate juvenile review boards around the state. In larger cities, where the volume of youth served is significantly higher, these diversion programs were funded through the state Department of Children and Families. DCF provided support to local community nonprofits like The Village for Children and Families in Hartford, New Haven Family Alliance, Waterbury Youth Services and RYASAP in Bridgeport to operate JRBs.

When juvenile justice shifted from DCF to the Court Support Services Division, the funding to support these programs did not follow, leaving arguably some of the most effective and essential programs keeping youth of color out of the system out in the cold. There is no funding to support our city JRBs until September. That funding isn't even a long term fix, as it is only guaranteed through the end of the fiscal year, June 30, 2019.

This means that during the summer months, when youth facing a lack of positive activities are more likely to be in trouble, they will not have the option of second chances to avoid court involvement or to obtain services in their communities. Hartford and Bridgeport have managed to barely keep their JRBs afloat while Waterbury and New Haven face having to

discharge 60-70 youth who are receiving not just a second chance, but essential services and supports.

For a state that prides itself on being progressive in support of youth, this is inexcusable.

The importance of JRBs is well known, within our cities and statewide. Yet these programs were shut out during a time when youth are most at risk of ending up in the system. If Connecticut cares about reducing the proportion of youth of color in the system and continuing to make progress in reducing the number of youth in our courts, funding must be provided, either by the state or with a public-private partnership, to allow these programs to keep doing their excellent work, and provisions should be put into place to make sure city youth, who make up the overwhelming majority of youth in the juvenile justice system, have these meaningful opportunities at second chances.

This is a “put up or shut up” moment for this state. If we really care about youth, youth of color, youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, then resources needed to keep those young people out of the system must be provided – both now and in the future.

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