



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Executive Office of Health and Human Services

Department of Youth Services

600 Washington Street, 4th floor

Boston, MA 02111

CHARLES D. BAKER
Governor

KARYN E. POLITO
Lieutenant Governor

MARYLOU SUDDERS
Secretary

CECELY REARDON
Acting Commissioner

617-727-7575
FAX#: 617-727-0696
www.mass.gov

**Testimony of Cecely Reardon, Acting Commissioner
Massachusetts Department of Youth Services
Joint Committee on Ways and Means
February 15, 2022**

Good morning, Vice Chair Friedman, Vice Chair Donato and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

My name is Cecely Reardon, and I am the Acting Commissioner for the Department of Youth Services (DYS). It is a pleasure to appear before the Committee today to speak about our Department's mission, priorities, and the Fiscal Year 2023 House 2 budget. As many of you know, Commissioner Peter Forbes retired at the end of December 2021 after serving the Department for 39 years. Commissioner Forbes was the longest-serving Commissioner in DYS history, and I had the privilege of working alongside him for the last 8 years as General Counsel.

The Department's mission is to promote positive change in the life trajectory of the youth in our care and custody. Governor Baker's proposed FY23 budget of \$175.8 M will allow DYS to continue to invest in highly qualified staff and operate a service continuum that engages youth, families, and communities in strategies that promote positive youth development. The Department provides young people with quality education, career readiness, employment opportunities, medical and behavioral health care, as well as other services to help them successfully reintegrate into the community. Our staff is focused on providing services that proactively address the needs of our population and effective programming that contributes to community safety.

Governor Baker's proposed FY23 budget provides funding that will further enhance and advance our service system to align with established science around adolescent brain development and trauma-informed care. Our leadership team has extensive experience and expertise in this work, and we continue to expand our use of data to inform our decisions and monitor our performance. We are

evaluating risk and needs assessment tools to ensure that “the right youth is in the right place for the right reason.” We are researching and adopting national best practices in our services and incorporating structured decision-making tools into our work to achieve more objective and consistent decision-making. This budget allows DYS to make strategic investments in evidence-based interventions and service models that can reduce recidivism of youth in our care and custody.

Census

In Calendar Year 2021, DYS served 398 committed youth and had 564 detention admissions and 451 overnight arrest admissions. For the sixth straight year, the average daily number of youths detained by or committed to DYS has decreased. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a steeper decline during CY 2020 as fewer youth were arrested and juvenile court proceedings were delayed. Since the Juvenile Court has returned to more routine activity in CY 2021, DYS has seen a smaller decline in its population of detained youth relative to CY 2020; however, detained youth continue to experience longer stays awaiting resolution of pending matters. In CY 2021, a daily average of 113 youth were held on bail at DYS facilities awaiting their next court appearance and a daily average of 249 committed youth were served in our residential and community settings. This represents a 16% decrease in detained youth and a 29% decrease in committed youth from the prior year. In CY 2021 the average age of detained and committed youth did not change from CY 2020. The average age of detained youth was 16 years and the average age of committed youth was 17.8 years. The average length of stay of youth in detention increased from an average of 52 days in CY 2020 to 65 days in CY 2021.

The detained and committed youth are served in a DYS service continuum that is both evidence-based and shaped by promising practices. The service continuum consists of state operated and contracted provider operated programs:

- **36 Residential Programs** including staff-secure to hardware-secure programs that provide a full array of education, vocational, recreation, clinical, medical, and behavioral health services including mental health and substance use treatment.
- **3 Reception Centers** providing community-based options for detained youth who present lower risk profiles.
- **7 Independent Living Programs** including two pre-independent living programs, providing residential and extensive community resource development services to older youth whose aftercare plan is designed around independent living. To address the changing demographic and needs of DYS youth, in FY22 DYS expanded independent living options to all DYS regions.
- **21 District Offices** providing case management, community services and daily supervision for youth who are living with a parent, guardian, foster parent or in a transitional living program.
- **8 Overnight Arrest Programs** serving the short-term, overnight needs of local police departments by providing overnight accommodations for youth arrested during evening hours and weekends pending their initial court appearance.

Workforce

Key to the Department’s success is a dedicated and well-trained workforce that feels appreciated and satisfied in their work. To continue to increase job satisfaction, DYS is always exploring ways to improve the work environment for staff, by promoting from within, actively recruiting a diverse workforce, and reducing mandatory overtime. Facilitating a positive work environment has been

integral to the Department's continued operations during this past year. Our congregate care staff continue to adapt to the changing protocols required by the COVID-19 pandemic while continuing to deliver effective programming. Whether it be security officers conducting daily screening of all persons entering our programs, transportation officers traveling to deliver PPE, or our frontline staff working in a quarantined COVID-19 unit, the Department has been able to adapt and continue to provide services because of our dedicated and committed staff.

The backbone of the DYS workforce is comprised of Juvenile Justice Youth Development Specialists (JJYDS), which currently represents 40% of DYS' workforce and is integral to the successful transition of youth in residential care back into the community. In FY20, DYS collaborated with AFSCME, representing almost 70% of our unionized workforce, to upgrade and rebrand our front-line staff from "group youth worker" to JJYDS which reflected a recognition that program safety and security is not just about supervision, but requires our staff to play an active role in supporting educational activities and promoting positive youth development as mentors, coaches, and advocates. In FY22, DYS also hired Recreation Coordinators for all five geographic regions to prioritize implementing holistic and dynamic recreation opportunities for youth in residential settings.

DYS has implemented new recruitment and retention strategies during the last fiscal year to address hiring challenges created by a difficult labor market and additional demands on staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. DYS has worked collaboratively with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to implement exigency differential pay increases, to attract candidates using new job search platforms, and to produce a recruitment campaign using social media. Attracting and retaining a workforce committed to the mission of DYS remains a top priority for the Department in FY23.

Equity and Fairness

DYS continues to prioritize racial equity and inclusion in all spheres of work. The Department has remained committed to our Fairness and Equity work plan and the steady progress made in several key areas:

- Fairness related to decision making and treatment of youth,
- Diversity throughout the ranks of the DYS workforce, and
- Ensuring organizational well-being where staff and youth are treated fairly, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or gender.

We believe a diverse workforce that is representative of the youth, families, and the communities we serve, builds trust. It can show youth that positive change is possible as evidenced by staff who have experienced similar challenges in their own youth. Recognizing the benefits of a more diverse workforce, the DYS 2020-2021 Diversity Plan includes measurable goals for promoting diverse candidates into management and leadership positions, and training staff how racial and ethnic disparities impact the DYS workforce and service continuum. In FY21, more than half of all promotions within DYS were of staff of color.

Other Department efforts in CY 2021 included:

- DYS's Training Academy piloted a Race, Equity, and Inclusion training, which is now included in basic training for all staff joining DYS.

- DYS developed new recruitment and retention strategies for attracting more diverse and qualified candidates and interview panel members, as well as revisions to policies and practices that may be creating barriers to job opportunities across all job titles.
- DYS convened the second annual Racial Trauma conference for DYS educators and clinicians to develop a shared understanding of the DYS approach to racial trauma, build their knowledge on how racism triggers trauma, and examine strategies for helping youth to cope.

Staff Safety

Youth and staff safety across the DYS service continuum continues to be a priority for the Department.

The DYS Safety Committee and Research team regularly reviews data on assaults, restraints, room confinement, and industrial accidents to inform new strategies and action plans for improving safety at the state and program levels. In FY21, as compared to FY20, the use of restraints decreased by 26%, the use of involuntary room confinement decreased by 32%, and the number of assaults decreased by 15%. DYS continues to examine the factors which impact assaults and the use of restraints and room confinement to examine and improve upon Department policies. In particular, DYS is taking into account, as it evaluates the FY20 and FY21 data, the impact that pandemic stressors, such as the delays in the resolution of court cases and the attendant increase length of stay for detained youth, medical isolation and quarantine of youth, and the disruptions in residential programming, have on youth in our residential programs.

Educational and Career Readiness Services

Educational services and career readiness are core components to DYS programming for youth in our care and custody. Educational attainment is a significant protective factor for our youth and has been demonstrated to impact recidivism rates and overall successful outcomes for our youth. That said, youth involved in the juvenile justice system have complex educational needs. Over the past several years, the distribution of youth across the DYS continuum of care has continued to change, skewing towards an older population. Newly committed youth are more likely to be 17 or older, and as in the past, most youth in DYS have experienced disruptions in their education and have histories of school failure resulting in many functioning below expected grade level. Between 45-55% of youth committed to DYS have a diagnosed disability requiring special education services and 13% are English Learners. The combination of having older youth with complex learning profiles who perform at different grade levels in our classrooms impacts the type of educational programming needed to engage youth and offer them the best opportunity to make educational progress while in DYS residential settings. To keep pace with shifting educational needs and the changing distribution of young people across the age and learning continuum, DYS has responded by providing individualized educational approaches to engage youth in learning and achieve positive educational and career outcomes.

In the last school year, DYS had 47 youth who earned their high school diploma, 23 youth who earned their GED/HiSET (representing a pass rate of 83%), and 58 youth who took and completed online college courses. The Department also had 172 youth who participated in career readiness and employment certifications. These certifications included 42 CPR and first aid attainments, 96 OSHA 10 (General Industry, Construction, Agriculture and Healthcare) attainments, and 34 ServSafe attainments.

In FY23, DYS plans to expand its vocational and technical education opportunities for youth. DYS has executed an RFR for a diverse network of vocational service providers to work with DYS youth. The FY23 House 2 budget will allow DYS to pair this RFR with equipment purchases and the reconfiguration of existing program spaces to support quality vocational education. The Governor's FY23 budget provides the funding for these educational, and career, vocational and technical education services that are so foundational to realizing positive life outcome for our youth.

Diversions, Reentry, and Recidivism

DYS continues to implement the JDAI (Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative), which promotes the placement of arraigned youth in appropriate settings as they await adjudication before the court. Alternatives to hardware-secure detention include placements in foster care, staff-secure DYS programs, or at home with additional services and supervision. In partnership with the Office of the Child Advocate, DYS has established three sites for new Diversion Learning Labs. Diversion services are targeted toward youth who have committed low-level offenses and need supportive services, such as, housing, substance use services, or mental health services. Most recently, the Department's JDAI State Coordinator was promoted to Chief of Staff of the agency. With her expertise, DYS hopes to bring additional focus to the agency's efforts around diversion and equity.

Since October 2019, DYS has received a federal Second Chance Act Reentry Grant, which helps support comprehensive reentry services. In FY21, DYS used the grant to hire three Employer Outreach Specialists who partner with companies such as Amazon, CVS, and Market Basket to host job fairs and place DYS youth in jobs, internships, and apprenticeships. These specialists have helped to build employment partnerships and training opportunities for youth in DYS custody and remove the stigma around youth committed to DYS. Through the same grant, DYS has developed a Strategic Plan for Housing Stability and Homelessness Prevention for DYS youth and a guide to Massachusetts housing resources for DYS caseworkers. In FY23, DYS plans to use the grant to support the hiring of Housing Transition Specialists to help youth navigate housing during the reentry process.

Youth Engaged in Services

Since 2016, the Youth Engaged in Services (YES) program has been offered to all youth who are discharged from DYS custody. YES allows DYS to continue to provide support to youth during the highest risk period for recidivism which is the first six months post-discharge. Through a YES voluntary agreement, a youth agrees to abide by the conditions of the agreement in exchange for continuing case management and other transitional supports such as housing, clinical services, continued education and/or job training. In FY21, 123 youth (64% of those who discharged) signed an agreement with DYS for voluntary services. To date, the average duration of voluntary services engagement is 306 days.

In June 2021, DYS contracted with the Boston University CERES Institute for Children & Youth to study the effects of the YES program on recidivism. Based on 1,360 youth discharged from DYS custody between 2015-2018, the report found that time spent in the YES program was a protective factor against recidivism. Accounting for a multitude of other factors, the report showed that YES youth have a modest, but statistically significant, lower recidivism rate compared to their non-YES peers. Additionally, those who spent more than six months in the YES program had a lower recidivism rate compared to those who spent less time.

Conclusion

The FY23 House 2 budget of \$175.8 M submitted by Governor Baker and Secretary Sudders supports continued progress for the Department of Youth Services and allows the Department to meet the needs of our current population. Under this proposal, DYS will be able to continue adapting to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and using our resources effectively to sustain improvement in our priority areas. DYS is committed to ending racial inequality in the juvenile justice system, and will maintain open communication with our partners, staff, youth, families, and the communities we serve to ensure a justice system that is fair and equitable. We will continue to improve our residential treatment and community re-entry services to increase our success with the highest-risk youth population and reduce recidivism. DYS will continue to be strategic in our investments in education and vocational services. We will continue to develop programming that is effective with an evolving population that is older, presents a more serious offense history and more complex behavioral profile.

In short, DYS will focus on delivering a system where:

- Youth in the Department's care and custody can achieve their maximum potential in school, work, and life,
- Families are supported,
- Communities are safer,
- Recidivism rates are lower for the DYS involved youth, and
- DYS staff and partners are valued and recognized for their dedication, skill, and professionalism.

I look forward to working with this Committee and the entire Legislature to successfully continue to make progress on our core goals and objectives. On behalf of Governor Baker, Lt. Governor Polito and Secretary Sudders, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on how our proposed Fiscal Year 2023 budget will support the Department's mission.

Thank you for your time.