



TESTIMONY OF THE CONNECTICUT JUVENILE JUSTICE ALLIANCE
TO THE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
WITH COMMENTS ON
DRAFT LCO #3471 AN ACT CONCERNING POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY
JULY 17, 2020

Good morning Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, and members of Judiciary Committee. My name is Abby Anderson; I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance (CTJJA). The CTJJA is statewide Youth/Adult Partnership working to end the criminalization of youth. The Alliance includes Justice Staff, Justice Advisors and Steering Committee members, which includes lawyers, researchers, clinicians, and social workers, who work across issue areas such as mental/behavioral health, family advocacy, substance abuse, youth services, LGBTQ issues, legal representation, education, research, community & residential services, and public policy reform.

The Justice Advisors are 18 through 25-year-olds from communities most impacted by the justice system. Their first and second-hand experience with the justice system brings credibility and authenticity to our work. They pursue the primary goal of meaningfully incorporating voices and experiences from those most impacted by the justice system into all discussions around juvenile justice policy, practice, and reform.

We are writing to ask Committee members to understand that police accountability is important, but only one aspect of the work needed to address racial disparities and inequities in our state and communities. Requiring training and body cameras can be tools, but not if they only serve to perpetuate the punitive, militaristic, systemically racially inequitable force that we have created our police departments to be over the decades. This isn't about "good" or "bad" apples, it is about job descriptions, priorities and who/which communities we view as assets vs who and which communities we view as "threatening." Real, hard work must be done to reimagine what we mean by public safety and what we need to do to actually achieve that goal for all communities.

Yes, we need police to be provide training around de-escalation and how trauma/implicit bias may impact their decision making. Yes, we need officers who abuse their power to be held accountable. Yes, we need officers to be provided counseling and support to process their own trauma. But most importantly, we need meaningful work to quickly understand what elements of the current police officer job description can and should be moved to the responsibility of those who are not authorized to use lethal force. Our testimony will outline what young people told us they think about policing and these recommendations and call on your final legislation to much more seriously and meaningfully limit the role of police through things like exploring the use of social workers, but also through considering adding language that would eliminate the use of police officers in schools.

The testimony provided today is heavily influenced by the work of our Justice Advisors. One of the ways that the Justice Advisors incorporate voices from those impacted by the justice system is holding vision sessions. These are conversations in facilities, programs, and community spaces that are held to gain additional insight into the needs, demands, and recommendations of

potentially, formerly & currently incarcerated youth as well as affected community and family members.

After the Justice Advisors held numerous vision sessions in 2018-2019, we reviewed notes and identified seven root causes of youth criminalization: Economic insecurity, housing insecurity, trauma within communities, lack of trust in the systems that display abuses of authority, a need for more positive influences and credible messengers, lack of hope, and a need for equal opportunities. One of the systems that they identified as hard to trust and that abused authority with no accountability is policing.

Our recent report, [Ending the Criminalization of Youth: One Investment at a Time](#), includes several calls to action. Number four on that list reads: ***The state must ensure law enforcement, and other people in positions of power who display abuses of authority are held accountable for their actions.***

The section of our report discussing what youth and community members told us about police and law enforcement is included here. You will notice that several of the recommendations that came from young people are echoed in this legislation: **calls for mental health services and supports for police officers; calls for helping officers learn how NOT to react from fear, stress, or escalation; and calls for evaluating when a police response is not appropriate so that we can offer the best alternative.**

Young people mentioned the fear of knowing that police officers are in complete control and can react off of impulse at any instant - “Most of them I come across yelling in your face and show you they’re the man in charge.” When police officers respond, physically or verbally, to situations out of fear, which can come from cultural misunderstandings or biases, or simply a person’s experience from the past, those responses can be dangerous. We’ve seen these situations grow into serious ones, like the 3 civilians killed by law enforcement within the first month of 2020 in CT. Since law enforcement has the power in most situations and officers get the benefit of the doubt, community members rarely get justice when harm is caused by law enforcement, and this includes institutional law enforcement.

We can avoid negative interactions between police and community members in a few ways.

- *Law enforcement officers must receive ongoing training around how to react in situations where they are under pressure or experiencing traumatic events. Part of their evaluation must address this area of their work.*
- *Communities could also stop relying on police when they aren’t actually the correct people to respond. Police are often called to address school discipline issues, or people experiencing mental health crises or homelessness. That isn’t their job and we shouldn’t ask them to play the role of a social worker. Instead, local and state leaders need to invest their dollars in the most appropriate support people.*
- *We can also work to repair and build relationships. It’s very easy to put the blame on community members when there’s a chaotic situation involving law enforcement, but we need to realize that the officers that are here to protect and serve our communities also have to do their own healing before they can protect and serve anyone. All law enforcement officers need to be properly trained to engage with people who have experienced trauma, but they also need the space, tools, and support to process their own trauma. Many traumatic experiences can lead to mental health illnesses, such as PTSD,*

which is severe and needs to be addressed for public safety and personal health reasons. Along with the trauma-specific support, we need to make sure we are providing a wide variety of other mental health services for law enforcement officers as well

The only section of your legislation that addresses the role of police in our communities is section 18. This section requires police departments to “evaluate the feasibility and potential impact of using social workers to respond to calls for assistance or accompany a police officer on certain calls for assistance.” This could be a step in the right direction with two significant changes.

First, the legislation as written calls for police departments to perform this evaluation. There is an inherent conflict of interest in asking professionals to determine if other professionals would be a better fit for a portion of their job description. We would never ask large soft drink manufacturers to evaluate the impact of drinking less soda on the health of children. Why would we ask police to determine if a social worker should replace them?

The key question the evaluation is meant to answer in the draft as written is “if the municipality would benefit.” We respectfully request that the responsibility for conducting and submitting the evaluation should be with the municipality and its leaders and not with the police themselves. There is an inherent conflict of interest in asking the police department to determine if there are other entities that are more appropriate to do a portion of their current job description. We don’t ask the association of soda manufacturers to determine if drinking less soda would make young children healthier as adolescents. The municipal leaders – First Selectmen and women, Mayors, City Councilpeople are the ones with the responsibility to most effectively and equitably use state, federal, and local funds to meet residents’ needs. They should be the one evaluating how to best utilize those funds.

The second change would be to broaden the scope of who could best benefit the municipality. This evaluation should not be limited to social workers. “Credible Messenger” programs that hire individuals from the community itself should be considered, substance abuse and other mental health providers should be considered, those trained in domestic violence, in homelessness, in human trafficking, in youth outreach and development should all be considered.

We’d also ask that the legislation be clarified and strengthened as to what happens after these evaluations are submitted six months after implementation. Are there consequences for municipalities who do not create such plans? Is there a timeline for what actions will be taken from these evaluations? Are there incentives or consequences for timely implementation? What assurances can you give our youth and communities that this is not another case of evaluations or reports being required through legislation without any follow up requirement to act upon those reports.

An item of robust discussion that does not appear in this draft is the issue of police officers in schools – school resource officers. Police in schools add to racial disparities related to youth arrests, dropout, suspension, and expulsion. They do not add to safety or educational outcomes. We would like to request the legislature consider language to call on districts to remove police officers from their buildings and instead replace them with support professionals including, but not limited to, social workers, psychiatrists, mentors, tutors, restorative justice specialists, based on what each school community (teachers, administrators, students, parents) identifies as their

particular need. Our colleagues from Connecticut Voices for Children have done extensive research on this issue in Connecticut and we would direct you to their [materials](#). Additionally, the Connecticut [School Based Diversion Initiative](#) has over 10 years of experience working to prevent in-school arrests and reduce out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for youth experiencing emotional or behavioral health challenges. Their research can also help provide guidance around this issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Abby Anderson

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Abigail Anderson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alliance member organizations:

AFCAMP, Center for Children's Advocacy, CHDI, Connecticut Legal Services, Connecticut Voices for Children, Connecticut Youth Services Association, Community Partners in Action, FAVOR, Office of the Chief Public Defender, Office of the Child Advocate, RYASAP, The Village for Families and Children