Maryland
DEPARTMENT OF
JUVENILE SERVICES

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Aruna Miller
Lt. Governor

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Acting Secretary

July 7, 2025

The Honorable J.B. Jennings
Maryland State Senate
Miller Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Senator Jennings,

Thank you for your kind words of congratulations and for taking the time to share your ongoing concerns regarding juvenile services in Maryland. I appreciate your active engagement and your commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of both youth and staff in our state's juvenile justice system.

One of my top priorities is improving conditions across our facilities. As you noted in your letter, we are facing staffing challenges at Hickey and at facilities throughout the state. I have begun addressing these challenges by visiting facilities and speaking with frontline staff to gain a deeper understanding of their needs. Additionally, I have initiated a review of all vacant positions across the Department and have begun converting appropriate vacancies into Resident Advisor positions to help stabilize staffing levels. We are also identifying internal efficiencies to better align our resources in support of staff and to ensure that youth are both held accountable and provided with the services they need to be successful.

I have also met with union representatives and members to discuss how we can work collaboratively to address staffing concerns and ensure our frontline staff have the tools and support they need.

Incident Trends and Monitoring

Since assuming this role, I have launched weekly data meetings with my senior leadership team to review key performance indicators (KPIs). While this process is still evolving, facility incident trends are a core metric we are actively tracking. As mentioned, we are reviewing facility-level data and implementing targeted interventions to improve safety. In the weeks leading up to the staff assaults in May, we observed an uptick in behavioral issues at Hickey, which we believe were driven by multiple factors, including staffing instability and disruptions to structured programming. System-wide, we are monitoring facility trends closely and deploying resources—including additional training, behavioral supports, and structured engagement opportunities—to mitigate safety risks.

Staffing at Charles H. Hickey, Jr. School

I share your concern regarding staffing at Hickey. I'm pleased to report that the Assistant Superintendent position has been filled, and we continue our efforts to recruit and retain additional direct care staff. We are also exploring ways to support staff returning from extended leave, improve morale, and strengthen overall retention.

Addressing the educational gaps identified in the JJMU report is also a priority. The Juvenile Services Education Program (JSEP) recently selected a new board chair, and a new superintendent is expected to begin in late August. I look forward to working with this new leadership team to ensure consistent, high-quality educational services and appropriate staffing across all school programs.

Interventions and Staff Engagement

Over the past year, the Department has taken significant steps to strengthen internal accountability, staff engagement, and program quality across our residential facilities. In Q4 of 2024, our senior residential leadership began conducting weekly site visits and holding in-depth conversations with frontline staff, youth, and middle managers to better understand operational challenges and opportunities for improvement. Focus groups conducted at Green Ridge and Backbone Mountain Youth Centers identified three top priorities:

1. Addressing staffing shortages, including the impact of draft coverage;
2. Updating the Comprehensive Treatment Model; and
3. Expanding staff training opportunities.

Under my leadership, we are building on this foundation by ensuring that staff engagement is paired with rigorous data review—so that the strategies we implement are delivering the intended outcomes. Our frontline staff are essential to ensuring the success and well-being of youth in our care, and my goal is to equip them with the tools, training, and support they need to do their jobs effectively.

Thank you for sharing the concerns raised by members of the Senate Republican Caucus, I recognize the importance of transparency and measurable progress in addressing repeat offending and improving outcomes for youth in our care. My approach to leadership is rooted in partnership, accountability, and a deep respect for the voices of those we serve, including youth, families, staff, community, and stakeholders.

I look forward to continuing this important conversation on Tuesday, July 8th.

Sincerely,

Betsy Fox Tolentino
Acting Secretary
Maryland Department of Juvenile Services