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June 2, 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 letter regarding recent reports of violence in Maryland's juvenile detention facilities, particularly at Green Ridge Youth Center. I share your deep concern for the safety of both staff and youth and appreciate your continued advocacy for public safety and meaningful rehabilitation in our juvenile justice system.

For background, the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) operates two types of facilities: detention centers and committed treatment centers. Detention centers house youth while they await adjudication—the juvenile system's equivalent of a trial in the adult system. Committed treatment centers, such as Green Ridge Youth Center, serve youth who have been adjudicated and are receiving treatment and rehabilitative services. For example, Charles H. Hickey School, located in your district, is a detention center, while Green Ridge is a committed facility. These settings differ in the populations they serve and the services they provide.

Please find below responses to each of your inquiries, as well as additional context on the Department of Juvenile Services' (DJS) ongoing efforts:

### **1. Immediate and long-term strategies to mitigate juvenile crime:**

DJS is taking several immediate and long-term steps to mitigate juvenile crime. First, DJS is expanding Thrive into a statewide program. We are continuing our relationships with We Our Us in Baltimore City and the Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement in Prince George's County. New providers include Kingdom Kare in Anne Arundel County, Tendea Family in Baltimore County, and Jacob's Ladder in Prince George's County.

Five more programs are applying for rates to serve youth in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Montgomery County, and the Eastern Shore. Once they have a rate, DJS will secure contracts with local providers. The Thrive model will also be adapted to support youth on probation who are experiencing significant challenges.

DJS launched the Thrive Academy in 2023 in response to the high number of youth on DJS caseloads who were victims or perpetrators of gun crime. The program began in four jurisdictions—Anne Arundel County, Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Prince George's County—which together accounted for 82% of youth victims of gun violence in FY23.

Thrive is an intensive, community-based program in which each youth participant is paired with both a specialized DJS case manager and a life coach who shares lived experiences similar to those of the youth they serve. The program provides participants with a personalized "suitcase of supports" tailored to their needs. Services include subsidized employment, assistance with college or vocational training, voluntary relocation support, and trauma-informed therapy.

The Thrive Academy has served 172 youth from September of 2023 to April of 2025. Of those, only 3% of Thrive youth have been gun violence victims, none have been homicide victims, and 4 out of 5 have not been arrested for a gun-related offense.

When I started, there were virtually no workforce options for youth, despite that being the number one request of our youth and research showing that employment helps reduce recidivism. DJS partnered with local Workforce Development Boards to secure dedicated training and employment opportunities for youth. Last summer, DJS had 128 summer employment slots available, providing critical early work experience.

In July 2023 DJS launched our Comprehensive Treatment Model (CTM) with the assistance of Georgetown University and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Under the CTM, we now provide Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) to all youth in our residential programs, such as Green Ridge. DBT has been found to reduce recidivism among delinquent youth in numerous high quality studies.

Finally, with funding from the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, DJS is conducting a county-by-county service continuum needs assessment to evaluate the availability and gaps in local programming. This collaborative process includes input from judges, magistrates, state's attorneys, public defenders, youth, and families. Our FY26 budget includes additional funding to expand and strengthen needed services. Every jurisdiction is different, and this assessment allows us to identify and invest in what's working while addressing local service gaps.

## **2. Protocols for youth assaults on staff:**

All incidents of violence are taken seriously and are investigated by the DJS Office of the Inspector General. When appropriate, matters are referred to law enforcement. When there is an assault in the facility, the DJS Executive Director and leadership team review the incident with staff to determine whether law enforcement involvement is warranted. Additionally, staff have the authority to contact law enforcement at the time of the incident if immediate intervention is needed. Youth who exhibit aggressive behavior face appropriate consequences, which may include the loss of privileges, programmatic expulsion and return to detention and, in some cases, legal charges. DJS places a strong emphasis on identifying the root causes of behavior through behavioral health evaluations and targeted interventions such as DBT and de-escalation strategies.

All incidents are tracked, reviewed, and analyzed at the executive level to identify trends and appropriate responses. DJS is also independently monitored by the Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit (JJMU), which publishes quarterly public reports on each facility.

## **3. Supports introduced or needed to maintain safety:**

DJS is deeply committed to its frontline staff, who are responsible for the day-to-day operations at the facilities and are the key components to ensuring that youth receive treatment, support, and accountability. Their work supports youth in making different decisions when they return to the community. To that end, since my arrival at DJS, we worked to significantly reduce front-line facility vacancy rates—from 17.38% in January 2023 to 5.09% in May 2025.

Lower vacancies reduce overtime, increase staffing consistency, and foster a calmer, more stable environment for youth and staff. In addition, DJS has incorporated evidence-based practices, including Safe Crisis Management (SCM) training, equipping staff with tools focused on de-escalation and youth skill development. Additionally, to help reduce idle time, facility staff partnered with the Juvenile Services Education Program to provide after-school programs for youth. These programs offer youth an opportunity to learn new skills and have exposure to new experiences. Additionally, when youth are positively occupied, they are much less likely to be involved in incidents.

#### 4. **Statewide plan/task force on facility safety and youth behavioral health:**

During the 2024 legislative session, the General Assembly passed HB 814, which established the Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform and Emerging Best Practices under the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy. The Commission comprises a diverse range of stakeholders, including frontline staff, mental health professionals, state's attorneys, law enforcement personnel, and community organizations. One of its workgroups is focused on behavioral health needs and facility safety. The Commission's first report is due in October 2025.

DJS remains committed to continuous improvement across all of its residential programs. Our internal Innovations Team is working to implement systemic reforms, expand trauma-informed practices, and elevate youth voice. These efforts are guided by collaboration with both staff and youth, and are aimed at building sustainable, supportive, and safe environments—particularly at facilities like Green Ridge.

I believe strongly that safety and rehabilitation are not mutually exclusive. When we invest in well-trained staff, trauma-informed practices, and strong community-based supports, we not only make facilities safer, we also build better outcomes for the young people in our care.

I welcome the opportunity to speak with you further or to arrange a facility visit. Thank you again for your commitment to public safety and to a more effective juvenile justice system.

Sincerely,



Vincent Schiraldi  
Secretary  
Maryland Department of Juvenile Services