



Juvenile Justice Coalition

January 26, 2018

Administrative Judge Kristin W. Sweeney
Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas, Juvenile Division
9300 Quincy Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44106

Dear Honorable Judge Sweeney,

We are writing today regarding the Cuyahoga County's Juvenile Detention Center. As you are aware, since the facility's opening, multiple incidents have put the safety of both youth and staff at risk. Unfortunately, past attempts to address these issues have not resolved ongoing safety issues. This cannot continue, and we urge county officials to act urgently and reasonably to address these systemic problems. Fortunately, we believe there is a clear path forward to success and safety for the Center and are willing to work collaboratively to achieve this goal.

In particular, we believe the county must engage in a three-pronged approach to solve these issues:

1. **Outside assessment.** Local officials have attempted to identify the underlying problems at the facility, but we believe the problems at the detention center have reached a level where outside experts with expertise in adolescent development and the juvenile justice system are needed to assess the facility and recommend next steps.
2. **Accountability.** Any action plan must be coupled with accountability measures to ensure that recommended changes are implemented. Past efforts at reforming the detention center have languished or not realized their full potential. This cannot happen again, as the safety and constitutional rights of those at the detention center are at risk.
3. **Alternatives to detention.** The problems at the detention center should be addressed in part by keeping youths out of the system in the first place who can be better handled in an alternative setting. Throughout the country, hundreds of jurisdictions— including several counties in Ohio — have increased the safety of their juvenile detention centers by working with the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI). As a JDAI site, Cuyahoga County has access to a bevy of resources to identify and implement data-driven, research-based changes to improve safety for both youth and staff in the facility. In addition, there are many local resources — including academic, advocacy, and community members — ready to provide support for a commitment to positive change.

In order to ensure the safety of youth and staff at the Center, we request the following steps be taken:

We request that the Cuyahoga Juvenile Court:

- Establish a diverse steering committee composed of a variety of stakeholders that reflect the JDAI core principles, including court personnel, public defenders, prosecutors, youth, community members, and detention staff, to oversee changes at the facility.

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- Through the steering committee, identify an outside expert to assess the facility and provide them access to review any existing facility assessments already undertaken. The steering committee should then work with the outside expert to establish a timeline to implement these changes and with regular reports to the public and interested stakeholders.

We request that the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's office:

- Place a hold on any additional charges for youth based on their actions within the facility based on the most recent incident until a thorough review of the incident and the facility at large can take place.
- End any discussion of moving youth to the adult jail. Adult jails are particularly unsafe for youth, who are often placed in solitary confinement or isolated in other ways. Other detention facilities throughout the state hold youth charged with high level offenses and Cuyahoga County is not an anomaly.

We request that the Cuyahoga County Executive and County Council:

- Commit to providing funding for necessary investments both to improve safety for youth and staff at the facility as well as community-based alternatives that can maintain public safety while reducing the detention population.
- Hold comprehensive meetings with diverse stakeholders – including youth in communities most impacted by violence – on how to utilize and implement research-based strategies to reduce violence in the county's communities, including making investments in proven programs that do not rely on detention and dragnet policing practices.

Thank you in advance for considering these requests and we look forward to working with you to implement these much needed changes for our communities.

Sincerely,

Erin Davies
Executive Director
Juvenile Justice Coalition



Mike Brickner
Senior Policy Director
ACLU of Ohio



cc: Armond Budish, Cuyahoga County Executive
Michael O'Malley, Cuyahoga County Prosecutor
Dan Brady, Cuyahoga County Council President