

October 2, 2023

The Honorable Robyn K. Kennedy
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities

The Honorable Jay D. Livingstone
House Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities

Dear Chair Kennedy, Chair Livingstone, Vice Chairs, and Committee members,

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of nearly 60 private and public organizations that collectively advocate for the availability, accessibility, and quality of services that are in the best interest of the Commonwealth's children, youth, and families. Our members know first-hand the struggles that children and their families face in the Commonwealth, which is why we are writing to testify **in support of "An Act regarding families and children in need of assistance" (S.101/H.134)** as presented by Senator Kennedy and Representative Blais.

This legislation was born out of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board's (JJPAD) 2022 recommendations to continue improving service to families and children in need of assistance (children requiring assistance, or CRA). CLM is a member of this board and we and our members contributed to the report. We agree with the Board's ultimate conclusion that the current CRA system fails to fully meet the needs of children and families. Barriers to accessing behavioral health supports in the community push families to seek help through the court system, despite the potential harms of court involvement and limited response options available to the Juvenile Court. However, these barriers are not eliminated by changing the CRA process.

We agree that shifting the CRA system to the Family Resource Centers (FRC's) would better meet the goal of creating a more family-friendly, efficient, and effective process for families seeking help. These centers are well-positioned to connect children and families to services that can address behavioral issues and any underlying causes, such as mental health, trauma, and education issues that can help more families engage with appropriate supports pre-crisis points and ultimately aide in the prevention of future delinquent court involvement.



However, to realize this vision, we offer two cautions.

First, we concur with Theme #2 from the JJPAD Annual Report, that to be successful the state must ***Increase Availability of School and Community-Based Services that Specifically Meet the Needs of Youth Currently in the CRA System.***¹ A fundamental challenge of CRA today is the shortage of treatment programs and placement beds for the youth in crisis; shifting CRA out of the courts and into the community does not change this landscape, it merely changes where families go for help. Further, the needs of children are highly varied and vary also by age: they may be behavioral, medical, developmental, or a combination of needs. Children waiting a long time for services may have different risk factors that are exacerbated by the wait.

These recommendations on Theme #2 echo our perspective that shifting ownership and oversight of the CRA process out of the courts to the Family Resource Centers must come with a shift in resources and a build-up of the community-based treatments and supports that families are seeking for their children:

- *Support community-based programs aimed at supporting youths' behavioral and mental health needs, as well as those that promote prosocial activities.*
- *Executive branch agencies should collaborate to identify program models that better meet the needs of youth struggling in out-of-home placements.*
- *Address truancy by promoting effective student engagement practices that address root causes of truancy, and better identify both schools and students in need of extra support.*

Specifically, Family Resource Centers are not currently designed, contracted, staffed, or funded to take on the volume of work of managing CRA cases and referrals. An overhaul of the FRC design and funding model is critical to the success of this bill.

Second, a benefit of the current CRA system is the accountability and gravity that comes with Juvenile Court and probation oversight of the child and family. We agree that court involvement has a negative impact on youth, attaching stigma and reinforcing a negative sense of self. Further, we agree that there is disproportionate usage of CRA court processes for youth of color and other marginalized populations, which reinforces other disproportionality in our child welfare and juvenile justice systems. However, for the most difficult or last resort CRA cases, there must remain an option for court involvement when refusal to engage becomes an issue that a community-based program

¹ JJPAD 2022 Annual Report p. 15



cannot mitigate alone. The reality of the services landscape means long wait times for some children; new placement models that allow for short-term stabilization for the highest acuity youth must also be part of the CRA system.

We respectfully urge the Committee to report out this bill favorably and work diligently for its passage with the intent to fully fund and support FRCs and community providers in this undertaking.

Sincerely,

Rachel Gwaltney
Executive Director
Children's League of Massachusetts

Supporting Members of the Children's League

Brandon School and Residential Treatment Center, Inc.
Communities for People
Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health
Fall River Deaconess Home
Family Continuity
Gándara Center
HopeWell
Justice Resource Institute
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