June 1, 2018

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Governor of Texas
State Capitol
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, TX 78711

Dear Governor Abbott:

In the letter you wrote to me on January 25, 2018, you outlined some of the challenges facing the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) as I began my tenure as executive director. I agreed wholeheartedly with your statement, “The State of Texas must ensure the safety and welfare of young offenders committed to its care.” I’d like to thank you for making available the Texas Rangers to help investigate instances of alleged abuse and misconduct by a small number of employees. The message we are sending is clear and unequivocal: TJJD will not tolerate such behavior. That was my commitment on day one, and it will remain so as long as I am leading this agency.

Your letter also requested that I submit a plan that included short-term solutions and long-term goals, which would become the focus of my leadership of TJJD. I am pleased to send you that document today.

Over the past several months, I have had the chance to travel to our various campuses across the state and meet with a wide range of stakeholders: superintendents and juvenile correctional officers (JCOs), probation chiefs and prosecutors, judges and legislators, community advocates and experts. I have been inspired by their professionalism and their commitment to improve our juvenile justice system in a manner that allows various groups to work together.

I have also drawn heavily on the most recent scientific and evidenced-based programs that have shown significant results in the lives of young people. As I developed the plan I am submitting to you today, I worked hard to incorporate those perspectives as I focused on the twin goals of public safety and effective rehabilitation.

Indeed, I am happy to report that we have already seen progress on several fronts. For example, the population in our secure facilities has dropped to historic lows, from 1,026 youth in December 2017 to 879 today. At the same time, we have seen a 43 percent drop in major rule violations and a 54 percent decrease in violent incidences. JCOs have lowered the use of physical restraints by 26 percent and the use of OC spray by 48 percent. All of this change is promising for Texas.
Of course, much hard work remains, and I am committed to seeing it through. With financial support from your office, our agency will provide body cameras to our staff who interact with our youth by the end of the year. We are also working hard to increase the training and retention of our officers, explore ways to send more of our youth to programs that are closer to their families and loved ones, and develop a program that treats the childhood trauma that afflicts so many of the youth in our system. And as TJJD moves forward, I will continue to solicit feedback and ideas from a wide range of experts who can help us realize our goals.

Thank you for the faith you have placed in me and the professionals across the state who are determined to improve the juvenile justice system. I look forward to a continued dialogue with you and your staff, and I am dedicated to ensuring that the agency meets the standards you expect and Texans deserve.

Sincerely,

Camille Cain
Executive Director

Enclosure
Short-Term Solutions and Long-Term Goals:

A Plan for TJJD

Camille Cain
Executive Director

June 1, 2018
Short-Term Solutions and Long-Term Goals

This document sets out the current thinking on the short-term solutions and long-term goals for the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD). This strategy is based on our efforts to gain insights from our stakeholders—a continuing focus for the agency—and for these plans to achieve their best outcomes, they must evolve over time and will benefit from ongoing discussions and input. Our purpose is to be transparent about our thinking, to coordinate large amounts of information, and to gain feedback and buy-in as we progress. We are confident that we can make positive changes in the near future, but ultimately, the decisions related to the reform of the juvenile justice system are in the hands of the Texas Legislature and Governor Abbott. Our role is to provide a collaborative environment, open communication, and the best information possible for those decision makers.

Our Goals

We envision a juvenile justice system that:

- Protects Texans by reducing future crime.
- Embraces a single-system approach with the state, counties, and other stakeholders working together.
- Holds youth accountable and intervenes through pragmatic, scientific, and evidence-based approaches.
- Is scalable to meet emerging issues and system needs across Texas.
- Supports flexibility and local control.
- Is accountable for specific, agreed-upon outcomes.

Our Approach

We see the future of TJJD in three distinct phases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short-term plans</th>
<th>Long-term goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reset</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reform</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(existing authority)</td>
<td>(new legislation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve supervision ratios</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Begin population reductions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Manage placements more proactively</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Increase JCOs available</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve safety</td>
<td>Phase resources to probation departments to create capacity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjust training to support current and future goals</td>
<td>Support models for high- and intensive-needs youth</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Support regional best practice sites in phases</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emphasize the role of TJJD in supporting counties through system coordination, providing appropriate regulation, oversight, funding, best practice support, technical assistance, credentialing, and training.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Provide placements for appropriate youth</td>
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Stakeholder collaboration
Short-Term Solutions: Reset

During this phase, we seek to stabilize our operations to make our facilities safer and prepare for the future. While we continue to review operations and look for improvements, at this time our plans include the following:

Improve supervision ratios

- **Begin population reduction**
  - **Active triage.** Through more proactive case reviews, we are ensuring the youth who should no longer be in our secure facilities are released or discharged. These actions have been successful in reducing our population to historic lows, from 1,026 in December 2017 to under 870 in May 2018.
  - **Treatment alignment.** We are conducting a review of our policies on Minimum Lengths of Stay as well as the methods for delivering our treatment programs to ensure the youth do not stay longer than necessary. Best practice tells us that it is important to find the right “dosage” of programming and keep youth in secure placements for the shortest appropriate period of time.¹

- **Manage placements more effectively**
  - **Movement and contracts.** For some youth who are a moderate risk or who have progressed well in a secure setting, medium-security contract care is an option. Other options exist for youth with higher security needs who meet the requirements of providers. We plan to increase the number of youth in appropriate contract care within our current budget by up to 30. There are additional available beds; however, we must first determine how many of our youth would qualify for such placements and then seek appropriate levels of funding.

- **Increase the available number of Juvenile Correctional Officers (JCOs)**
  - **Suitability.** We are reviewing our screening and background check procedures to better ensure that applicants are well-suited to the rigors of the job and possess the character required to be successful. We have already strengthened our background screening process, and we are developing methods that allow us to be more transparent with candidates about the requirements and stressors of the job.
  - **Training and retention officers.** We are moving the responsibility for these officers to our training academy to ensure that we can provide consistent training and a clear focus on the primary duty of on-the-job training, while shifting toward a more active coaching role, especially for new recruits with a focus on support and retention.
  - **Work-life balance.** TJJD strives to maintain appropriate youth-to-staff ratios but sometimes does so by requiring its JCOs to work overtime, often without notice, and may not approve requested scheduled leave. We will introduce an objective method for making leave decisions as

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well as ensuring that vacation requests can be built into the overall schedule in advance to better support our staff, decrease stress, and improve retention.

Improve safety

- **Gate and perimeter security.** Currently, JCOs staff the gates and conduct perimeter checks, and in some cases this assignment is given to staff who are on non-contact positions because of an ongoing investigation. This situation presents two problems. First, we need to have as many JCOs as possible to supervise youth. Second, while at least 93 percent of complaints by youth against staff are unsubstantiated or based on false allegations, we cannot risk the security of the facilities with a practice that places staff under investigation in charge of the gates. As a result, we have begun moving the responsibility for gatehouse operations to the Office of the Inspector General, where it can be overseen by their TCOLE-certified law enforcement officers.

- **Body cameras.** We are providing body cameras to our JCOs, which should have an immediate, positive impact on our agency’s operations. Unlike our fixed cameras, body cameras include audio, which will allow for quick review of complaints, avoidance of unnecessary non-contact assignments, and the ability to act more quickly when allegations are substantiated. Additionally, body cameras have been found to affect the behavior of those around them, which we believe will improve youth behavior.²

Adjust training to support current and future goals

- **Coaching and leadership.** We will invest in leadership and coaching training for our supervisory and more-tenured JCOs to provide support for new employees to help them through the first few months on the job, which can be the most difficult.

- **Continuing education.** We will review our current training program to increase opportunities for our longer-term JCOs to reinforce their learning and to continue to grow their expertise.

Short-Term Successes

Governor Abbott sent us two key charges: 1) to decrease the population and 2) to improve safety in our facilities. In the past five months, we have seen progress on both fronts. Population reduction is a key factor, but some successes outpace that reduction. We have made significant progress in population reduction through more active triage and have seen improved safety on our campuses as measured by reductions in major rule violations and youth violence. Working closely with the Inspector General and the Texas Rangers, we have identified, removed, and held criminally responsible those few individuals who abused their power in our facilities, and we will continue these efforts. We know that we must continue our work to improve our culture and our interventions with youth to see greater gains. We believe that staff have the best interests of youth at heart, and we will focus on changes and training that increase the skills and tools needed to continue momentum and reduce staff attrition. Based on these short-term successes, we are more confident than ever that we can make positive, sustained progress.

Reductions in violence and major rule violations
Modest population reductions have contributed to significant drops in negative behavior and violence

Reductions in security referrals
Security referrals are down, and in the future we will provide alternative spaces for youth who need a place to calm down and self-regulate

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1 Major rule violations are those that are of a serious nature, mainly violations of the Texas Penal Code.
2 Acts of violence are a subset of major rule violations and include assaults and fighting with or without injury (on staff or youth) and threatening another with a weapon.
Reductions in use of force
The use of force has dropped significantly, and we are working on new intervention methods to achieve further reductions

JCOs to youth
TJJD now has more JCOs than youth, but attrition continues to be an issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>December 2017</th>
<th>May 2018</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JCOs*</td>
<td>1020</td>
<td>975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>1023</td>
<td>872</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- In December, TJJD had 3 more youth than JCOs
- In May 2018, we have 103 more JCOs than youth

*It takes several individual JCOs to man a 24-hour, 7-day per week post
Long-Term Goals: Reform

Between 2007 and 2011, the Texas Legislature made significant changes to the juvenile justice system. In addition to merging the Texas Youth Commission and the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission, it changed the commitment criteria to exclude youth who had committed misdemeanors and lowered the age of jurisdiction from 21 to 19, which strongly contributed to a decrease in commitments. Those actions, along with an overall drop in crime, effectively dropped the number of youth committed to TJJD from 2,457, in 2007, to 879, in 2012, and eventually reduced the number of secure facilities operated by TJJD to five. Since then, commitments have dropped even more, down to 802, in 2017.

The Texas Legislature also set into motion principles of reform—to improve the environments and interventions for youth and to increase the involvement of families and support systems. It is with those principles in mind that we have developed our goals for the future, including new strategies and a one-system approach. We will also keep in mind our central purpose: to increase public safety. In looking at approaches for an improved system, we are also determined to make pragmatic decisions about interventions by using research and evidence to tell us what is most likely to work.

The Texas Model

Our current vision for the model includes a set of principles for the overall design of the system along with a set of key intervention principles:

**System Principles**
- A focus on need and risk levels of youth.
- A graduated set of options to meet youth and system needs, which may change over time.
- A greater focus on a single juvenile justice system as a partnership between county juvenile probation departments and TJJD.
- A commitment to the shortest appropriate length of stay.$^3$
- Youth stay closer to their communities in every possible case.
- Youth stay as shallow in the system as possible.
- Provide for scalability to meet changing or emerging needs.

**Intervention Principles**$^4$
- A foundation in trauma-informed care.$^5$
- A treatment-rich environment and direct-care staff who reinforce treatment goals.
- An approach grounded in evidence-based practices.
- Transparent plans between agency and youth to understand requirements and the consequences of their actions—both positive and negative—with strong accountability.

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• An after-care and reentry plan that begins early to better ensure successful transition back to the community.
• The ability for the young person’s family and support system to see and interact with them as often as possible.

Vision for a Reformed System
One major issue for reform, both short- and long-term, is our method of intervention with youth. TJJD is committed to pragmatic solutions based on science and evidence. A central component of that is trauma-informed care, which recognizes that youth in the juvenile justice system have extremely high instances of childhood trauma that can affect their brain development, their ability to trust others, and their ability to make rational choices and regulate their own behavior. It focuses on meeting the basic needs of youth and helping them to feel safe and then learning to engage in appropriate, trusting relationships with proper boundaries; identify and express their moods and emotions; and learn to regulate their own responses.

We have begun measuring our youth’s Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These ten measures of childhood trauma can help to predict many negative outcomes including early death, dangerous health conditions, and of course, the likelihood that a youth will exhibit negative behaviors and become victims themselves. People with 6 or more ACEs are 24 times more likely to attempt suicide. A conservative estimate suggests that youth in TJJD facilities are 3.5 times more likely than the public to have 4 or more ACEs (a level of significant concern), and many of our youth have more. It is clear that we must intervene with that trauma to help youth begin to learn to regulate their own behavior. To start that effort, we will make some simple changes across the board, provide new training, and open two pilot dorms (one for boys and one for girls) to demonstrate and learn from our new approach.

Additionally, at this point in our research and discussion with stakeholders, it seems clear that working to further reduce, or “right size,” our population is a critical element of reform. There are four main focuses that we should consider and refine as we go forward, including determining how the related services are provided.

• First, we should make sure that probation departments have adequate capacity and resources to keep more youth within their current systems and what the limits are both by capacity and by type of needs.
• Second, there are currently places in the state where youth must be far away from home because their hometowns are distant from current secure state facilities. We should focus on finding alternatives that embrace best practices and allow youth to remain closer to their homes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TJJD Prevalence by Factor</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>#</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents Separated/Divorced</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>1070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarcerated Household Member</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Violence</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Substance Abuse</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Abuse</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Neglect</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Neglect</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Mental Illness</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For all TJJD youth including those in facilities, halfway houses, contract care, and on parole.

• Third, there is a need for placements for high needs or violent youth who are not appropriate for placement within current probation services or regional facilities.
• Fourth, there is a need for placements for the small number of youth with intensive needs. Such needs might include severe mental health issues, extraordinarily complex trauma, and intellectual disabilities; however, further research is needed to validate and project these needs.

The figure below sets out one possible high-level design for the purposes of further discussion and refinement of the model.

An Illustrative “Texas Model” for Discussion
Our vision for the Texas model of juvenile justice includes a smooth progression of services in which youth are placed where they can do best.

Current Questions
It is inevitable that new questions will present themselves throughout our planning efforts and that refinements to our design will be needed, but some questions are already clear.

Intensive Services
From discussions, it seems apparent that a small number of youth have such intensive needs that it would be unrealistic to spread such services across the state. But questions remain:

• Does the data prove this thesis, and if so, what are the specific needs and necessary capacity?
• Which services are required? Stakeholders have expressed needs for intensive mental health issues, extreme complex trauma, and intellectual disabilities when co-occurring with other significant needs. We must validate if these categories are correct and determine if there are others.
• How can TJJD partner with other agencies to provide support of these services? Can we promote appropriate placements for these services in the public or private sector?
Higher Risk Services
Probation chiefs have expressed a need for TJJD to continue to offer some level of capacity for the highest-risk youth. Some questions to consider:

- What does the data tell us about need?
- What are the common needs of these youth? What programming is needed?
- What type of youth should qualify for this level of care?

Regional High-Needs Services
These placements would be for the remainder of youth currently committed to TJJD. Questions that remain:

- What does the data tell us about the capacity needed and the appropriate locations?
- Should additional restrictions be placed on commitments assuming local or regional probation capacity is adequate or can be grown?
- What is the right combination of contract placements, brick-and-mortar builds, and conversion of existing facilities?
- How quickly can these come online? How should phasing work?

Long-Term Goals: Refocus
While much work must be done before entering this phase, we will seek to make adjustments that can ready us. It is clear that the approach of TJJD must shift from a primary focus on the small number of youth in our institutions to a fuller focus on the system as a whole, with local probation departments having a significant voice and TJJD taking on a more supportive role.