



TEXAS JUVENILE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT

Response to the Independent Ombudsman Third Quarter Report, FY 2024 March 13, 2025

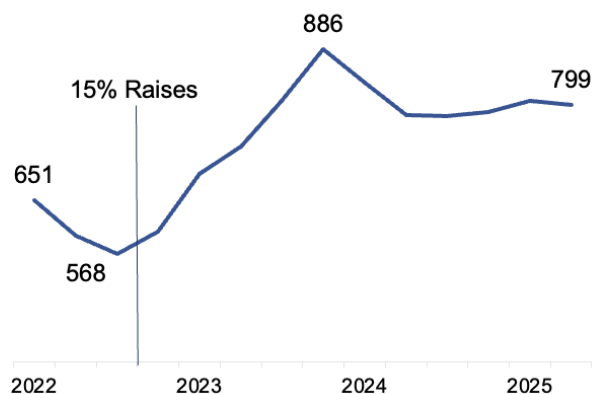
The Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) received the Third Quarter Report for FY 2024 from the Office of the Independent Ombudsman (OIO) on February 24, 2025. The report covers the time period between March and May 2024. The following provides a response to the report and updates on ongoing agency efforts.

General Updates and Staffing Information

TJJD agrees with OIO's observation and analysis that staffing problems were the most serious issue facing the juvenile justice system during the third quarter of fiscal year 2024. Recruiting and retaining staff remain major challenges for TJJD.

However, the agency has made great strides since the height of its staffing crisis in mid-2022. As shown in the accompanying graph, pay raises for key staff authorized by the Governor and Legislature allowed the agency to increase staffing strength by over 200 JCOs between the end of fiscal year 2022 and the beginning of fiscal year 2025. With more staff resources, TJJD's five secure facilities absorbed 200 additional youth, increasing the average daily youth population from about 550 to 750. This, in turn, decreased the waitlist from a high of 165 youth to 113 on March 10, 2025. With greater stability, TJJD employees had the bandwidth to implement and sustain innovative, evidence-based initiatives — such as the use of Dialectical Behavior Therapy and integrated treatment plans — designed to improve safety both inside facilities and in Texas communities where youth are ultimately released.

Average Monthly Juvenile Correctional Officer FTEs by Fiscal Quarter



Additional improvements are still required to maintain TJJD's progress and fully embody the agency's core values of safety, accountability, and transparency. As of March 6, TJJD had an estimated need for 868 JCOs, with 775 of these positions filled. Across secure facilities, 607 JCOs were available to provide sole supervision to committed youth. This equates to 70 percent of needed positions filled with available staff.¹

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¹ TJJD defines "available staff" as filled JCO positions minus unavailable staff (e.g., staff in pre-service training for their first 60 days or those on extended leave, such as military or FMLA leave.)

To further increase filled and available JCO positions, TJJD must keep tackling the root causes of staff shortages:

- **Pay:** First, the agency is working closing with lawmakers during the 89th session to ensure pay for direct-care staff better aligns with the risk that these employees shoulder. The introduced versions of the Senate and House budgets included a 15 percent pay increase for direct-care employees — an incredible investment in these public servants who go above and beyond to fulfill TJJD’s critical mission.
- **Working conditions:** Second, TJJD continues to hone its training, supervision, monitoring, and behavior management procedures to improve safety. For example, TJJD has implemented key changes, such as the egregious behavior protocol and supervision sustainability measures, to increase structure and support throughout facilities. The agency is also educating lawmakers on possible statutory changes that would enhance accountability following assaults on staff and fellow youth, as well as funding requests that would augment staff wellness initiatives.
- **Geographic location:** Finally, the rural locations of several TJJD facilities contribute to ongoing staffing challenges. Last legislative session, lawmakers appropriated \$200M to TJJD for the expansion of state juvenile justice capacity by 200 beds. The Legislature specified new facilities must be located as close as practical to population centers that can fully support TJJD’s correctional and rehabilitative workforce needs. Since the summer of 2024, TJJD has worked closely with state and county partners to identify sites for two 104-bed facilities that will focus on youth with high-level mental health and violent behavior treatment needs. In recent months, the agency’s governing board approved site locations in Brazoria and Ellis counties. After receiving final approval from the Legislature, TJJD will dive more deeply into the design and construction process; the agency aims to open new facilities in early 2028.

Key Initiatives Moving Forward

In addition to assisting lawmakers throughout the 89th legislative session and implementing resulting directives, TJJD staff remain committed to completing various initiatives related to increased efficiency and effectiveness. While not exhaustive, the information below highlights key priorities over the next several months:

Long-term strategic planning: In December 2024, Governor Abbott appointed Tarrant County Commissioner Manny Ramirez as the new chair of the Texas Juvenile Justice Board. One of Commissioner Ramirez’s first acts as chair was directing staff to begin developing a 10-year strategic plan that would map out a clear vision for the juvenile justice continuum. This plan creates an exciting opportunity for TJJD and county probation departments to outline what the continuum can and should look like moving forward. Starting with a kickoff in April, TJJD staff will work in partnership with various stakeholders to set and achieve actionable goals that will make Texas the nation’s leader in juvenile justice operations.

Training and staff professionalism: TJJD leadership recently convened a work group tasked with identifying and implementing enhanced de-escalation and situational awareness training. In March 2025, over 20 TJJD staff will participate in an enhanced de-escalation training with TDCJ. TJJD

has also begun the process of overhauling the new hire training academy to further emphasize core correctional practices.

Recruitment and retention programs: To take TJJD's recruitment and retention gains to the next level, the agency is working closely with external experts that have addressed the needs of similar entities across the United States. Through an initial pilot program, TJJD intends to sharpen its existing staffing strategies and better understand which of these strategies is most promising for continued investment.

Case management system revamp: After a years-long effort, the agency aims to launch a new case management system in mid-March. The CONNECT system will create a user-friendly and efficient repository of youth information, simplifying the data storage and tracking process for all staff who work directly with state-committed youth.