



**Response to the Independent Ombudsman
Fourth Report, FY 2024
May 14, 2025**

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) received the Fourth Quarter Report for FY 2024 from the Office of the Independent Ombudsman (OIO) on April 25, 2025. The report covers the time period between June and August 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 fourth quarter of fiscal year 2024. Recruiting and retaining staff remain major challenges for TJJD.

However, as noted in the response to the Third Quarter Report for FY 2024, the agency has made great strides since the height of its staffing crisis in mid-2022. Pay raises for key staff authorized by the Governor and Legislature allowed the agency to increase staffing strength by about 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 750.¹

With greater staffing stability, TJJD employees had the bandwidth to implement and sustain innovative, evidence-based initiatives — such as the use of Dialectical Behavior Therapy — designed to improve safety both inside facilities and in Texas communities where youth are ultimately released.

Increased staffing also decreased the waitlist from a high of 165 youth in mid-2022 to 126 on May 12, 2025. So far throughout FY 2025, TJJD has moved about 380 youth off of the waitlist and into state facilities. The agency decreased the amount of time youth spend on the waitlist from over 100 days in mid-2022 to an average of about 70 days for youth admissions throughout fiscal year 2025. In addition to bringing youth off of the waitlist as quickly as possible while maintaining safety in state facilities, TJJD has worked to minimize the impact of the waitlist by:

- Developing a curriculum with counties to support youth awaiting transfer;
- Considering a youth's time on the waitlist when making decisions about a youth's stage and release; and
- Reimbursing counties for stays on the waitlist past 30 days.

¹ Notably, the agency continues to see a rise in the risk and needs of youth admitted to secure facilities, with more youth demonstrating mental health and aggressive behavior treatment needs at intake. Together, rising populations and acuity levels contribute to changes in training, use of force, and programming, which TJJD actively discusses with OIO on a regular basis.

Additional staffing improvements are still required to maintain TJJJ’s progress and fully embody the agency’s core values of safety, accountability, and transparency. As of May 8, TJJJ had an estimated need for 904 JCOs, with 804 of these positions filled (*compared to 868 and 775 respectively in our last report response*). Across secure facilities, 640 JCOs were available to provide sole supervision to committed youth (*compared to 607 in our last report response*). This equates to 71 percent of needed positions filled with available staff.²

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

- **Pay:** First, the agency is working closely 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 TJJJ’s critical mission. Other bills that are currently moving through the legislative process would add certain direct-care staff to the Law Enforcement and Correctional Officer Supplemental Retirement Fund and authorize lump-sum payments for unused vacation time, subject to limitations. Together, each of these changes would increase support for employees and improve recruitment and retention tools at the agency.
- **Working conditions:** Second, TJJJ continues to hone its training, supervision, monitoring, and behavior management procedures to improve safety. For example, TJJJ 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 continuing to educate lawmakers on possible statutory changes that would enhance accountability following assaults on staff and fellow youth, as well as funding requests that would augment safety and wellness initiatives.
- **Geographic location:** Finally, the rural locations of several TJJJ facilities contribute to ongoing staffing challenges. Last legislative session, lawmakers appropriated \$200M to TJJJ 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 TJJJ’s correctional and rehabilitative workforce needs. Since the summer of 2024, TJJJ 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. As of May 2025, the agency’s governing board, relevant local entities, and the Texas Facilities Commission have approved site locations in Brazoria and Ellis counties. After receiving final approval from the Legislature during the 89th session, TJJJ will dive more deeply into the design and construction process; the agency aims to bring new facilities online in 2028.

Key Initiatives Moving Forward

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

² TJJJ 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.)

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. The agency kicked off this planning process on April 16, Juvenile Justice Professionals' Day at the Texas Capitol. Over the next eight months, TJJD will work directly with expert partners at other state agencies to finalize the plan and educate state leaders about critical findings.

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 participated 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.

Integrated treatment plans. For several months, the agency's treatment, operations, parole, education, and medical teams worked closely together to design and roll out integrated treatment plans (ITPs) across facilities. Providing each youth with a single ITP consolidates overlapping plans previously used by various TJJD teams and, most importantly, ensures youth and staff alike are aligned in their goals to decrease risk factors, identify treatment needs, and plan for effective reentry. As of April 2025, all youth in secure facilities had an ITP.

Technology updates. In March 2025, TJJD launched its CONNECT system, the updated case management system that simplified data storage and tracking processes for all staff working directly with committed youth. Additionally, the agency updated its body-worn cameras across secure facilities, adding functionalities that improve tracking of incidents and appropriate usage.