



TJJD RIDER 35 REPORT: ANNUAL HR MANAGEMENT PLAN, FY 2026

October 2025



TEXAS
JUVENILE JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT

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Section I: Rider 35 Background

During the 89th regular session, the Texas Legislature continued to make significant investments in the state's juvenile justice system, including raises for state-level employees and other funding increases to assist with the recruitment and retention of juvenile justice professionals. During the 88th regular legislative session, the Legislature adopted Rider 38 (now Rider 35), the text of which is provided below. The rider requires the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) to develop a plan for improving employee morale and retention, as well as decreasing turnover. Only through effective recruitment and retention efforts can TJJD maintain sufficient staffing levels to ensure safety for youth and employees, provide meaningful rehabilitative treatment and programming, and ultimately enable a youth's successful return to the community.

Rider 35 requires the agency to submit its plan, including various data requirements related to staffing levels, by October 1 of each year. TJJD developed the following report as the second iteration of the Human Resources Management Plan in response to Rider 35's directives.

For any additional information regarding this report, contact various agency staff including:

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Text of Rider 35 in TJJJ's Bill Pattern¹

Human Resources Management Plan. From funds appropriated above, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJJ) shall develop a Human Resources Management Plan designed to improve employee morale and retention. The plan must focus on reducing employee turnover through better management. TJJJ shall report by October 1 of each year to the Senate Finance Committee, the House Committee on Appropriations, the Legislative Budget Board, and the Governor. Each report shall include, at a minimum and for at least the preceding twelve months the following information by job category: employee turnover rate, percent workers retained six months after completion of training, and employee tenure. The effectiveness of TJJJ's plan shall be measured by whether there is a reduction in employee turnover rates at the agency, specifically by the reduction in the turnover rates for juvenile correctional officers.

¹ Texas Juvenile Justice Department, Article V, p. V-37-38 (SB 1), Acts of the 89th Legislature, Regular Session, 2025 (General Appropriations Act).

Section II: Introduction to TJJD

Agency Mission: Why We Exist

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) is the state’s standalone juvenile justice agency. Its mission is to transform young lives and create safer communities. TJJD accomplishes this mission by adhering to three foundational pillars and four core values.

Pillars: How We Work:

- **Safety:** We take every measure to protect staff, youth, and communities from physical and psychological harm, abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
- **Accountability:** The juvenile justice system is rooted in accountability for youth and staff, where everyone is held responsible for their actions and outcomes. TJJD believes that the behavior we, as staff, desire to see in others should first be seen through our own actions.
- **Transparency:** TJJD maintains trust and transparency with all stakeholders through direct, honest, accurate, and proactive communication. The agency does not shy away from difficult conversations.

Values: What We Believe In

- **Teamliness:** Working together with trust, shared purpose, and selfless commitment to achieve our mission.
- **Integrity:** Prioritizing honesty and courage over ego and perfectionism.
- **Excellence:** Showing up each day with energy and pride so we can be our best and make a difference together.
- **Growth:** Stretching our systems, skills, and selves so we can move forward collectively.

Key Statute

Together, TJJD’s mission and values reinforce the statutory purposes of the juvenile justice system and the agency, as established by the Family Code and Human Resources Code.

Section 51.01, Texas Family Code

Sec. 51.01. PURPOSE AND INTERPRETATION. This title shall be construed to effectuate the following public purposes:

- (1) to provide for the protection of the public and public safety;
- (2) consistent with the protection of the public and public safety:
 - (A) to promote the concept of punishment for criminal acts;
 - (B) to remove, where appropriate, the taint of criminality from children committing certain unlawful acts; and
 - (C) to provide treatment, training, and rehabilitation that emphasizes the accountability and responsibility of both the parent and the child for the child's conduct;
- (3) to provide for the care, the protection, and the wholesome moral, mental, and physical development of children coming within its provisions;
- (4) to protect the welfare of the community and to control the commission of unlawful acts by children;
- (5) to achieve the foregoing purposes in a family environment whenever possible, separating the child from the child's parents only when necessary for the child's welfare or in the interest of public safety and when a child is removed from the child's family, to give the child the care that should be provided by parents; and
- (6) to provide a simple judicial procedure through which the provisions of this title are executed and enforced and in which the parties are assured a fair hearing and their constitutional and other legal rights recognized and enforced.

Section 201.002, Texas Human Resources Code

Sec. 201.002. PURPOSES AND INTERPRETATION. This title shall be construed to have the following public purposes:

- (1) creating a unified state juvenile justice agency that works in partnership with local county governments, the courts, and communities to promote public safety by providing a full continuum of effective supports and services to youth from initial contact through termination of supervision; and

(2) creating a juvenile justice system that produces positive outcomes for youth, families, and communities by:

(A) assuring accountability, quality, consistency, and transparency through effective monitoring and the use of systemwide performance measures;

(B) promoting the use of program and service designs and interventions proven to be most effective in rehabilitating youth;

(C) prioritizing the use of community-based or family-based programs and services for youth over the placement or commitment of youth to a secure facility;

(D) operating the state facilities to effectively house and rehabilitate the youthful offenders that cannot be safely served in another setting; and

(E) protecting and enhancing the cooperative agreements between state and local county governments.

Primary Functions

To operate effectively for youth, families, juvenile justice staff, and Texas communities, the state's juvenile justice system requires close collaboration between local and state levels of government.

At the locally driven "front end" of the system, county juvenile boards oversee the state's 165 county juvenile probation departments, which may serve youth in the community or in county-run or private facilities located throughout the state. TJJD's main duties at the local level include:

- Distributing formula-funded and competitive grants to county juvenile probation departments;
- Coordinating regionalization initiatives to keep youth as shallow in the system as appropriate;
- Establishing minimum standards for local departments and facilities, and ensuring compliance with those standards through inspections, technical assistance, and training; and
- Certifying county-level employees who work directly with youth.

At the “back end” of the system, TJJD is directly responsible for youth committed by a court to the agency’s custody for a felony-level offense. TJJD’s main duties at the state level include:

- Housing and supervising committed youth in the state’s five secure facilities and three halfway houses;
- Providing rehabilitative, educational, medical, case management, and other critical services to youth in state care; and
- Coordinating youth reentry into their communities and providing parole services.

In TJJD’s long-term facilities, youth engage in a structured schedule of programming, including education, recreation, skills groups, leisure time, and specialized treatment. All youth in these settings benefit from the **Texas Model**, TJJD’s foundational rehabilitation approach. The Model uses evidence-based principles to promote structure; lasting change in youth; increase positive skill development; and improve safety for youth, staff, and communities alike. Initially launched in 2019, the Texas Model aims to create a structured rehabilitative milieu (or environment) in which staff have the tools they need to maintain safety and accountability, reinforce treatment goals, and effectively change behavior before youth return home. In 2023, the Model evolved to incorporate Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), a cognitive behavior therapy shown to reduce self-harm, suicide behaviors, aggression, and recidivism.²

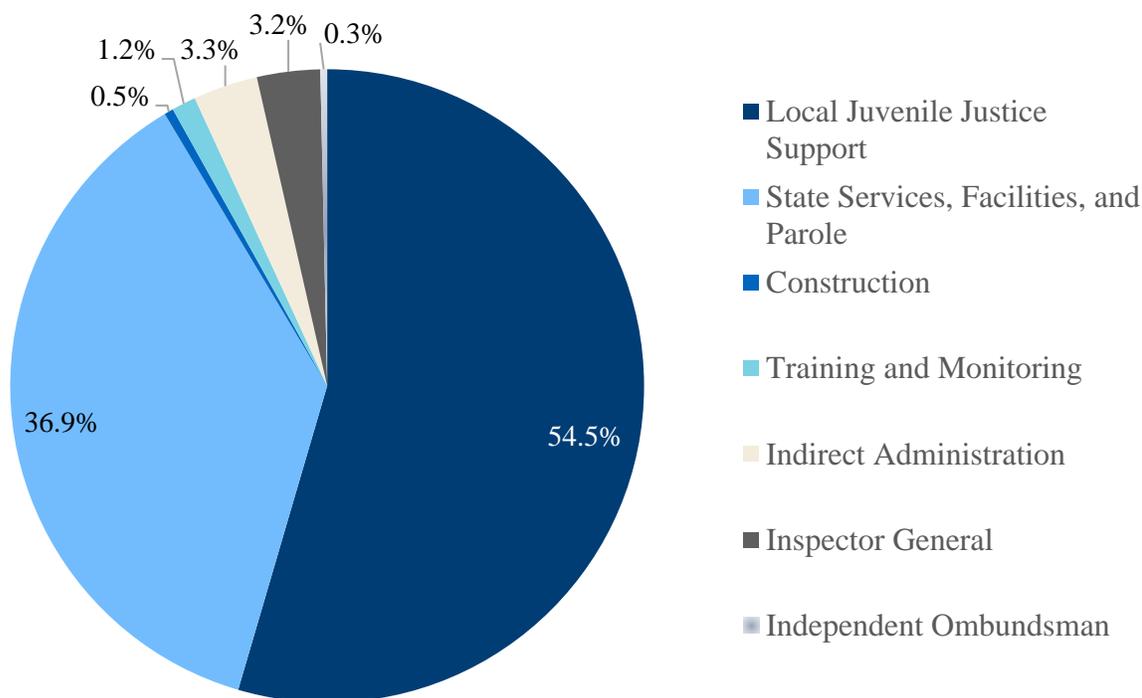
Budget and FTEs

Across fiscal years 2026 and 2027, the Legislature appropriated TJJD approximately \$953.1 million to fulfill its public safety functions. As shown in the chart on the next page, main uses of these funds include:

- \$520M (55%) dedicated to supporting county partners and;
- \$351M (37%) dedicated to supporting state facilities and parole services

² For resources on DBT and its outcomes, visit TJJD’s website at www.tjjd.texas.gov/state-programs/texasmodel/#Resources.

TJJD Budget: Fiscal Years 2026-27³



TJJD’s cap for full-time equivalent (FTE) employees in fiscal years 2026 and 2027 is 2,253.3. At the end of fiscal year 2025, TJJD employed about 2,062 FTEs (91% of the cap).⁴ Of these employees, about 1,260 (55% of the cap; 61% of total FTEs) provided direct services to youth. With the increased FTEs provided by the 89th Regular Legislative Session, the Office of Inspector General now employs approximately 122 FTEs and the Office of the Independent Ombudsman employs approximately 14 FTEs.

³ Across the FY2026-27 biennium, the Legislature appropriated \$953,074,347 to TJJD. About \$30.7 million was dedicated solely to the operations of the Office of Inspector General. In addition to the amounts shown in the chart, the Legislature appropriated \$3.3 million to the Office of the Independent Ombudsman.

⁴ TJJD’s FTE cap also includes staff dedicated solely to the operations of the Office of Inspector General (OIG) and Office of the Independent Ombudsman (OIO). OIG received an additional 27 FTEs for the 2026-27 biennium while OIO received an additional 4 FTEs.

Report Focus

Addressing turnover and staffing shortages among juvenile justice professionals requires a cross-continuum approach. For example, improvements to staffing strength at the backend of the system stem from not only robust recruitment and retention efforts at the state level but also increased diversion opportunities at the local level. However, county juvenile probation departments are operating at capacity, and costs to maintain programming at this level of the system are rising. Expanding the system's diversion options requires a sufficient local workforce so county juvenile probation departments and service providers can adequately support more youth closer to home, particularly youth with higher-acuity treatment needs and criminogenic risks. For more information on capacity building efforts, see the following:

- The agency's Rider 41 (88th Regular Legislative Session) report published here: <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/TJJD-Rider-41-Report.pdf>.
- The agency's forthcoming biennial Regionalization Plan, which will be published on TJJD's website by December 1.⁵

While improving county staffing levels and programming availability are key priorities for the agency, state staffing strength is the focus of this report. Throughout the plan, TJJD will provide:

- An overview of agency turnover rates, retention information, and tenure data;
- A review of the main drivers of TJJD's turnover rates and fluctuating staffing strength;
- A description of the agency's responses to recruitment, retention, and morale needs, including plans for maintaining and expanding these efforts where appropriate; and
- An overview of relevant items funded by the Legislature from TJJD's legislative appropriations request for fiscal years 2026 and 2027.

A Note on Report Data

Wherever possible, this report uses data from fiscal year 2025 to ensure the information provided is current. However, some data covering fiscal year 2025 was not available by the report's required submission date. In those areas, staff used fiscal year 2024 data.

⁵ TJJD's 2024 Regionalization Plan can be found on the agency's website here: [TJJD-Biennial-Regionalization-Plan-2024.pdf](#)

Section III: Turnover, Retention, and Tenure Overview

Maintaining sufficient staffing levels was a struggle for TJJD’s predecessor agencies and remains a critical issue today. The 2021-22 Sunset Advisory Commission review identified employee shortages as the agency’s main problem.⁶ The Sunset report noted:⁷

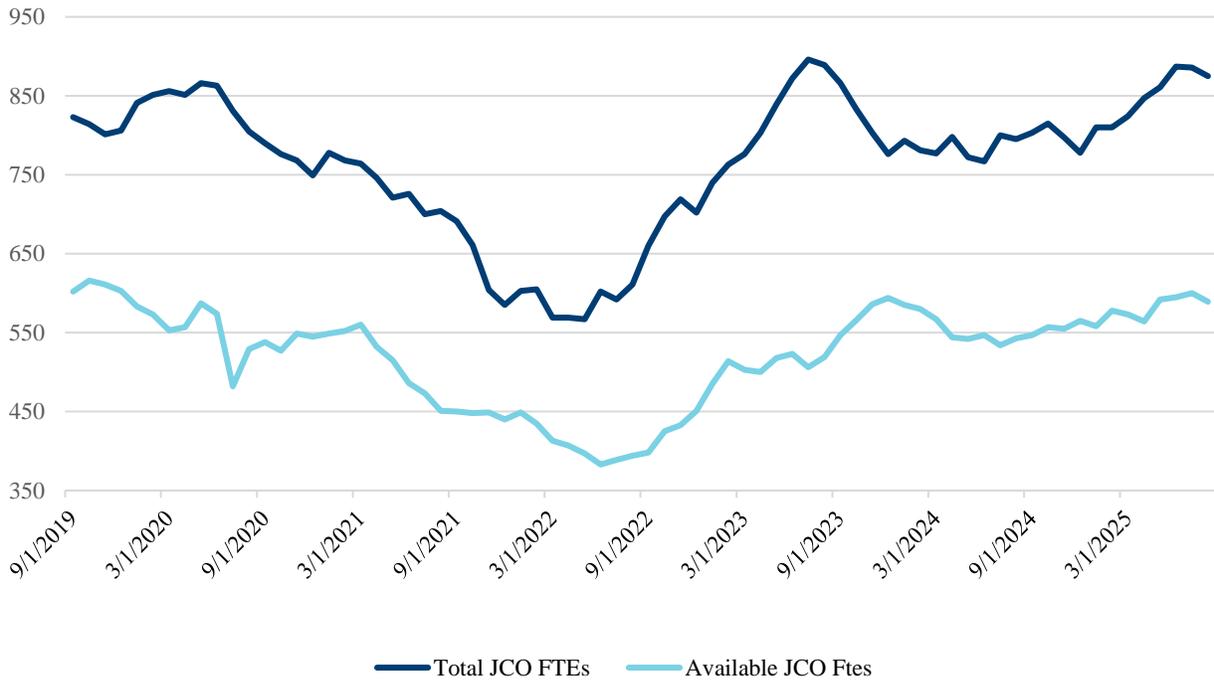
Employee turnover usually lies outside of Sunset’s focus on maximizing efficiency and effectiveness within an agency’s existing resources. However, the impacts of TJJD’s severe staffing shortages on agency operations have become so pervasive, Sunset staff determined focusing on other problems could exacerbate rather than fix issues negatively impacting youth, employees, and stakeholders.

Employee vacancies reached crisis levels during the biennium in which Sunset, and subsequently the U.S. Department of Justice, reviewed secure facility operations. While annual turnover rates were relatively stable between fiscal years 2020 and 2024, the crisis hit when agency departures outstripped hiring, causing shortages shown in the graph on the next page. During the summer of 2022 when juvenile correctional officer (JCO) levels fell to their lowest point, TJJD’s five secure facilities collectively operated at roughly 200% of their available staffing capacity. Overstretched operations impacted facility culture, overall safety, and programming. Long shifts and challenging working environments compounded existing turnover issues, which intensified a cycle of increased burdens on the staff who remained at facilities and dedicated their time to ensuring safety.

⁶ Sunset Advisory Commission. (June 2023). *Staff Report with Final Results: Texas Juvenile Justice Department and Office of the Independent Ombudsman*. Retrieved September 1, 2024, from https://www.sunset.texas.gov/public/uploads/2023-08/TJJD%20and%20Office%20of%20the%20Independent%20Ombudsman%20Staff%20Report%20with%20Final%20Results_6-26-23.pdf.

⁷ Ibid, p. 20.

JCO Staffing Levels: FY 2020-25



Data Review

As shown in the graph above, TJJD has seen recent improvements in JCO coverage. With the addition of hundreds of new JCOs, secure facilities have also increased their average daily population by over 200 youth since the summer of 2022. At the same time, the agency was able to bolster access to treatment providers by adjusting mental health staff-to-youth ratios from 1:16 to 1:12, 1:8, or 1:4, depending on a youth’s programming needs.

Still, staff churn remains a continuous concern for positions across the agency. In particular, fluctuating turnover, retention, and tenure levels among the following key positions contribute to heightened risk in secure facilities:

- JCOs.** JCOs supervise youth day in and day out in state-level facilities that operate 24/7. Working in these positions involves long and demanding hours including weekends, holidays, overnight shifts, and on-call statuses. JCOs regularly encounter youth who exhibit violent, aggressive, or self-injurious behaviors, necessitating quick thinking, de-escalation skills, and the ability to maintain order and safety at all times. This

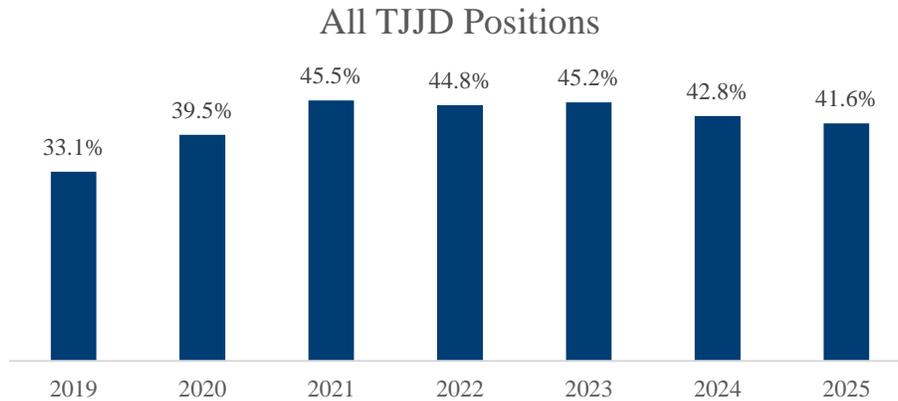
environment exposes JCOs to high levels of stress, emotional strain, and the risk of physical harm or injury. Their roles encompass elements of law enforcement, behavior management, mentoring, and crisis intervention, requiring a diverse skillset and a deep understanding of TJJD's behavior management approach to be successful. JCOs must use appropriate intervention methods to correct behavior and teach new skills; maintain a consistently safe and structured environment throughout each facility; and employ security measures in response to safety threats. These factors collectively demonstrate that JCOs face some of the toughest challenges and responsibilities in the entire state workforce. In a very real sense, these employees are first responders.

- **Case managers.** Case managers protect public safety by ensuring youth are accountable, informed, and supported so they may progress through TJJD's programming. Case managers serve as steady hands to ensure that each youth can comprehend their circumstances and their pathway home, as well as the consequences of deviating from their treatment plans and behavior management goals. Among other tasks, a case manager's role includes building trusting relationships with youth, families, and fellow staff; explaining programmatic requirements and maintaining individualized treatment plans; celebrating successes and responding appropriately to youths' areas for growth; and facilitating transitions to new challenges, with the overarching goal of producing positive outcomes in Texas communities.
- **Other positions.** Other positions that are critical to the agency's operations, mission, and vision have seen increased turnover rates over several years. Security Officers provide essential basic security functions at state facilities including ensuring quick response times to incidents and maintaining gatehouse operations. Food service workers at state facilities provide youth with all meals and adhere to state and federal food safety regulations as well as requirements associated with the National School Lunch and Breakfast program. Additionally, staff assigned to the agency's headquarters have experienced increased turnover. Central office staff provide necessary and critical support to all agency operations, including facility operations and support for local juvenile probation departments.

Turnover Rates

The graph below shows changes in TJJD’s turnover rate over time, starting in fiscal year 2019.

TJJD Turnover Rate, FYs 2019-2025



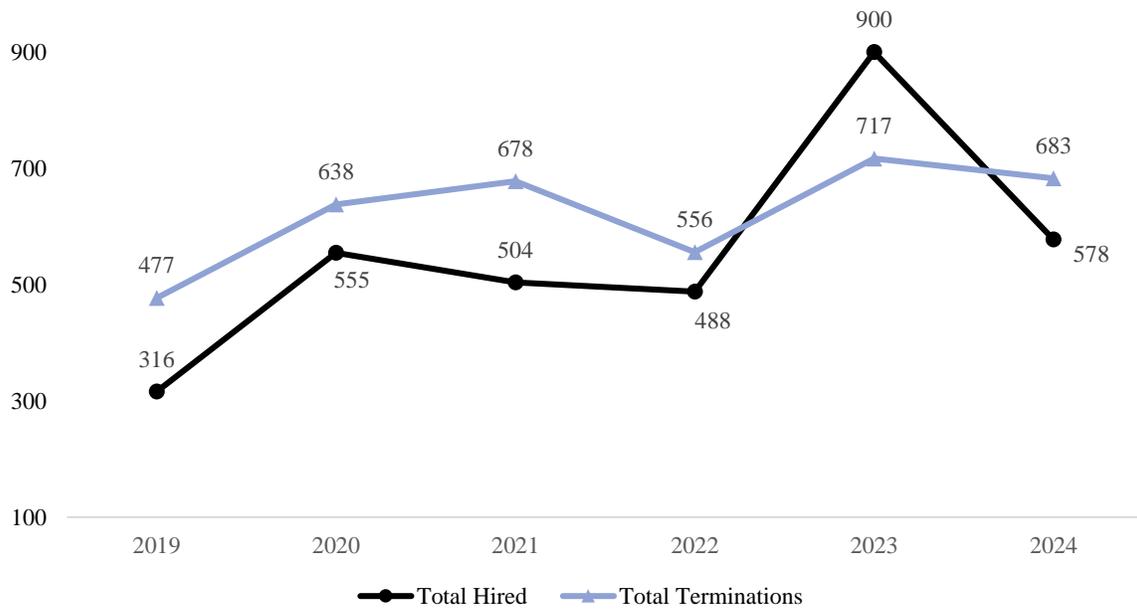
JCOs comprise the majority of all TJJD employees, working across secure facilities and halfway houses, and turnover among employees in this position drives overall shortages throughout the agency. The table below provides turnover rates for various TJJD positions, including several identified in the most recent *Annual Report on Classified Employee Turnover* published by the State Auditor’s Office (SAO). The agency has seen improvement in retention across several positions including Mental Health Professionals (MHPs), Dorm Supervisors, and Parole Officers.

Position	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
JCO	60.9%	71.3%	71.9%	70.6%	70.0%	66.5%
Case Manager	28.1%	50.4%	51.9%	31.3%	32.7%	30.3%
MHP	28.5%	40.7%	30.7%	28.3%	18.5%	16.7%
Dorm Supervisor	33.3%	41.3%	24.7%	25.0%	19.0%	16.1%
Security Officer	30.3%	33.7%	26.3%	21.9%	24.7%	29.9%
Parole Officer	13.8%	14.0%	27.2%	25.9%	13.2%	13.8%
Teacher	17.7%	21.1%	26.4%	16.3%	14.9%	19.1%

Food Service	17.3%	33.6%	22.4%	30.2%	29.2%	40.0%
Central Office Staff	15.5%	9.3%	17.4%	14.8%	12.4%	19.7%

Over the last two fiscal years, the agency has seen gains in staffing levels, particularly among JCOs. As shown in the graph below, hiring of JCOs equaled and then outstripped their turnover throughout much of fiscal year 2023, leading to net gains in filled JCO positions. Despite initial losses during fiscal year 2024, the agency again experienced gains during the year, allowing TJJD’s secure facilities to end fiscal year 2025 with 91% of budgeted JCO positions filled and 86% of JCO positions filled with available staff.⁸

JCO Hiring vs. Departures, FYs 2019-2024



Retention Nine Months After Training

To make sustainable staffing progress, TJJD must not only recruit adequate numbers of staff but also improve retention efforts so employees may apply their initial months of training to implementing change initiatives. The table on page 18 provides retention data for the agency as a

⁸ Available staff is defined as filled JCO positions minus unavailable staff, such as those in pre-service training or on extended leave.

whole and for specific positions between fiscal years 2019 and 2024. Given the size of the JCO workforce, this position drives TJJD's overall retention outcomes. While the JCO retention rate dropped to 25% for newly trained staff during the pandemic, it increased to 41% in fiscal year 2024.

To boost JCO retention rates further, TJJD has updated various training procedures, including the following (which are discussed in greater detail in Section V):

- Reviewing curricula to better align required statutory content with on-the-job expectations and youth demographics;
- Changing schedules so new hires return to the training academy for their final 60 hours of material later in their initial months of service, allowing for an additional opportunity to reinforce key content, receive and act upon feedback, and offer supplemental assistance as needed; and
- Pairing new JCOs with tenured staff who can provide ongoing support during a JCO's initial months working in facilities.

Rider 35 requires the agency to provide information on the number of employees retained six months after they complete training. However, precise training timelines vary by position and, at times, by employee depending on their role, background, and support needs. To meet rider requirements while maintaining consistency, the table below shows retention data at the nine-month mark of an individual's employment with the agency. This aligns with TJJD's expectations for supervisors to set 30-, 60-, and 90-day goals with new employees, as discussed in Section V.

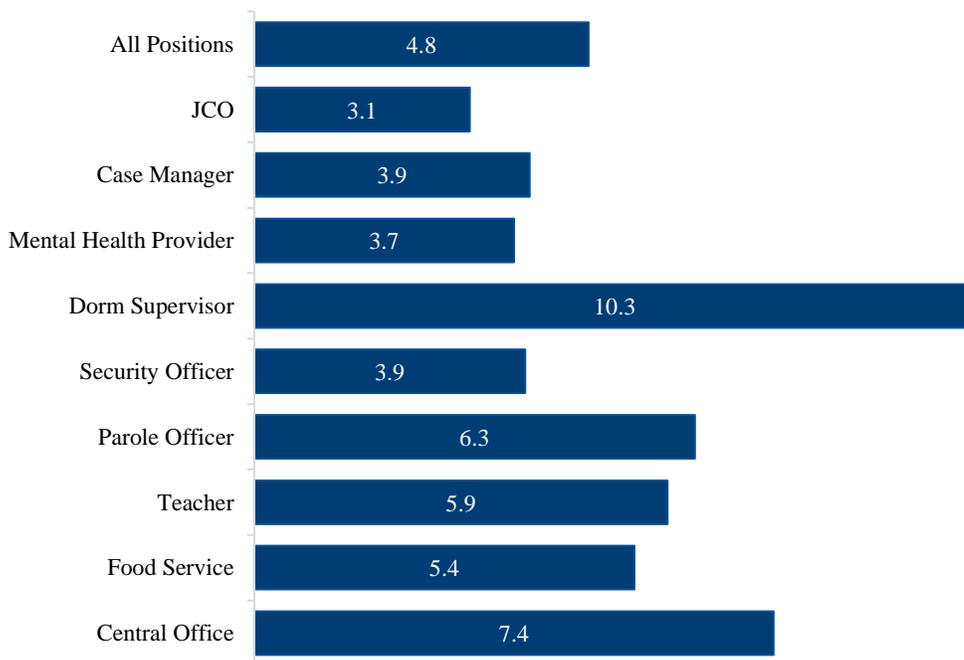
Retention Rates After Nine Months, Fiscal Years 2020-2024

Position		FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24
All	Total Hired	782	668	708	1,162	850
	Retained After 9 Mos.	371	230	319	545	456
	% Retained After 9 Mos.	47%	34%	45%	47%	54%
JCO	Total Hired	555	504	487	900	578
	Retained After 9 Mos.	184	124	164	346	236
	% Retained After 9 Mos.	33%	25%	34%	38%	41%
Case Manager	Total Hired	31	34	36	31	36
	Retained After 9 Mos.	25	13	21	22	22
	% Retained After 9 Mos.	81%	38%	58%	71%	61%
MHP	Total Hired	32	26	22	14	38
	Retained After 9 Mos.	27	19	19	10	29
	% Retained After 9 Mos.	84%	73%	86%	71%	76%
Security Officer	Total Hired	12	14	9	19	12
	Retained After 9 Mos.	10	9	6	12	10
	% Retained After 9 Mos.	83%	64%	67%	63%	83%
Parole Officer	Total Hired	3	4	7	6	3
	Retained After 9 Mos.	3	3	6	5	2
	% Retained After 9 Mos.	100%	75%	86%	83%	67%
Teacher	Total Hired	24	11	22	30	24
	Retained After 9 Mos.	21	8	14	26	21
	% Retained After 9 Mos.	88%	73%	64%	87%	88%
Food Services	Total Hired	10	12	9	23	18
	Retained After 9 Mos.	4	3	3	18	11
	% Retained After 9 Mos.	40%	25%	33%	48%	61%

Agency Tenure

As shown in the graph below, the average tenure of all TJJD employees was 4.8 years at the end of fiscal year 2025. Average tenure among JCOs, the largest job category within the agency, was 3.1 years. However, the average tenure among JCO Vs and Dorm Supervisors at the end of fiscal year 2025 was approximately 8.4 years, indicating that as JCOs move up their career ladder, they tend to stay longer. At the same time in September 2024, almost half of JCOs working in secure facilities were still within their first year of agency service. This breakdown demonstrates the need for TJJD’s constant focus on both the fundamentals of facility operations with new staff and forward-thinking culture change with more tenured staff.

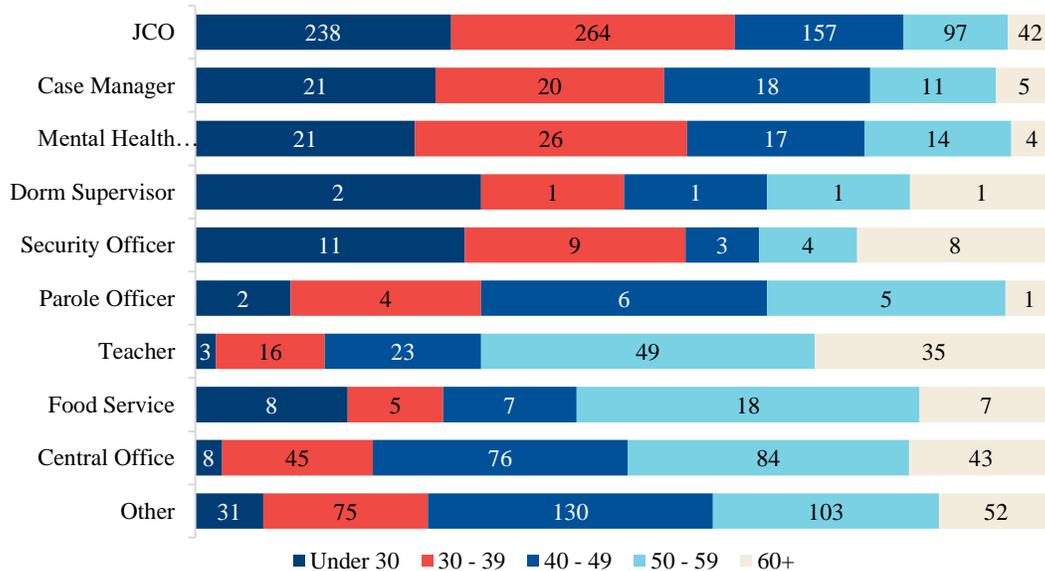
TJJD Tenure by Position, Fiscal Year 2025



Along with tenure, TJJD tracks the age of employees to prevent gaps in staffing levels and institutional knowledge that may occur as long-time workers retire. At the end of fiscal year 2025, the average age across all TJJD employees was 43 years old. The average and median ages of JCOs were 37 and 34, respectively. The largest age categories among all TJJD employees and

among JCOs were those under 30 and those aged 30 to 39, with a nearly equal number of staff in each group.

TJJD Staff Ages by Category, Fiscal Year 2025



Nationwide Correctional Staff Shortages

The statistics discussed in this section are not unique to TJJD. Employee vacancies within the juvenile and adult correctional systems persist across the country. Between 2019 and 2022, 21 states (including Texas) saw at least a 10% drop in their correctional workforce; during this timeframe, only three states experienced an increase of over 1% in correctional staff.⁹ By 2022, the number of individuals working in state prison facilities dropped to its lowest point in over two decades.¹⁰ In a recent survey of 33 state juvenile justice agencies and multiple probation entities, the Council of State Governments Justice Center found that almost 90% of juvenile

⁹ Heffernan, S., & Li, W. (2024, January 10). “New Data Shows How Dire the Prison Staffing Shortage Really Is.” *The Marshall Project*. Retrieved September 2, 2024, from <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/01/10/prison-correctional-officer-shortage-overtime-data>.

¹⁰ Koran, M., & Mayo, J. (2024, July 2). “10 Guards, 900 Inmates and the Dire Results of Warnings Ignored.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved September 4, 2024, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/02/us/wi-prison-staffing-shortage.html>.

correctional agencies were experiencing moderate or severe challenges with hiring and retention; the majority of jurisdictions stated these problems were greater now than at any time in the past five to 10 years.¹¹

In Texas, SAO has consistently identified high turnover across correctional positions. In fiscal year 2024, SAO reported that the criminal justice job category had the highest turnover rate (26.1%) which was a decrease when compared to fiscal year 2023.¹² Additionally, both TJJD and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) saw an overall decrease in turnover in fiscal year 2024 compared to fiscal year 2023.¹³

Shortages in juvenile and adult facilities affect these systems differently. Unlike TDCJ, TJJD must maintain a 1:8 staff-to-youth ratio. Assigning more youth to a single staff member fails to provide adequate supervision for high-needs youth and negatively affects safety for everyone living and working in facilities. Deviations from the 1:8 ratio also fail to comply with federal standards for juvenile facilities established under the Prison Rape Elimination Act.¹⁴

Recognizing the unique risks and needs present within juvenile correctional spaces, PREA does not require the same staffing standard in adult facilities.

When TJJD lacks the staff necessary to maintain its 1:8 ratio, the agency may be forced to replace facilities' typical schedule with shortened hybrid programming, mobile teams, or lockdowns; transition non-JCO employees (like case managers and teachers) into direct supervision roles for coverage; and bring in third-party staffing assistance. Despite these measures, shortages still contribute to the following:

¹¹ The Council of State Governments Justice Center. (October 2023). *Systems in Crisis: Revamping the Juvenile Justice Workforce and Core Strategies for Improving Public Safety and Youth Outcomes*. Retrieved September 2, 2024, from https://projects.csgjusticecenter.org/systems-in-crisis/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2023/10/Systems_in_Crisis_Brief-1.pdf.

¹² State Auditor's Office. *Classification Reports: Employee Turnover*. Retrieved September 22, 2025, from <https://hr.sao.texas.gov/Reports/Category/Turnover/>.

¹³ State Auditor's Office. (January 2024). *An Annual Report on Classified Employee Turnover for Fiscal Year 2023*. Retrieved September 10, 2024, from <https://sao.texas.gov/reports/main/24-702.pdf>.

¹⁴ 28 C.F.R. § 115.313(c)

- **Heightened safety risks.** When JCO staffing levels were at their lowest, the agency also experienced an increase in youth suicide alerts, requiring more intensive supervision from TJJD’s clinical staff.
- **Increased staff burnout.** Chronic overwork — particularly in the face of rising youth risks and needs (described further in Section IV) — fuels burnout and agency departures, creating a downward spiral of turnover.
- **An inability to immediately admit all youth committed to state custody.** Delayed admissions create a waitlist of youth who must remain in county-level facilities until a state bed becomes available. The waitlist peaked at 166 youth during the summer of 2022 and decreased to about 100 youth by the end of September 2024. Across fiscal year 2025, TJJD moved nearly 560 youth off of the waitlist and into state secure facilities. TJJD began October 2025 with 145 youth waiting for a staffed state bed.

Section IV: Drivers of Staff Shortages

To efficiently and effectively address staff shortages, TJJJ must first understand the root causes of turnover. Along with the State Auditor’s Office (SAO), the agency collects this information in a variety of ways, all of which inform the leadership team’s resource allocation decisions and strategic initiatives.

SAO offers an optional exit survey for employees leaving their current positions regardless of the reason for leaving. During fiscal year 2024, the majority of state employees leaving their jobs cited retirement, better pay/benefits, and poor working conditions/environment as the top three reasons for leaving.¹⁵ Fewer state employees cited “better pay/benefits” as their reason for leaving in fiscal year 2024 compared to fiscal year 2023. When asked “where are you going?” the majority of state employees were separating from state government entirely. When asked about the increase or decrease of their new salary compared to their current salary, 15.9% of respondents said they would be making between \$5,000 and \$10,000 more, and 42.0% of employees said they will be making \$10,001 or more than their current salary.¹⁶

TJJJ conducts annual staff surveys on key topics, such as perceptions of safety, adequacy of supervisory support, and cross-agency communication. These surveys also ask employees about their intent to leave the agency within the next year, allowing TJJJ to assess and tackle turnover causes proactively. Second, similar to other agencies, TJJJ conducts voluntary exit surveys when employees depart by choice or through termination. Agency researchers review the resulting data continuously and may apply findings to special projects, such as an analysis of salary increases that TJJJ implemented in 2022. Additionally, the agency requires staff supervisors to meet with their direct reports regularly to discuss certain information, including workload, professional development needs, and overall performance. Supervisory sessions provide an avenue for leaders to evaluate individual and team needs, and develop tailored staff support opportunities. Finally, TJJJ partners with external entities to expand staff research

¹⁵ State Auditor’s Office, *An Annual Report on Classified Employee Turnover for Fiscal Year 2024*. Retrieved 24 September 2025. <https://sao.texas.gov/Reports/Main/25-705.pdf>

¹⁶ Ibid.

capacity on topics like recruitment, retention, and culture change initiatives. Section V outlines upcoming partnerships designed to assess and influence the implementation of TJJD's recent change efforts.

Using these tools, TJJD has consistently identified three primary causes of low staffing strength: working conditions, pay, and facility locations. SAO found that the top three primary reasons for leaving the agency are poor working conditions, pay/benefits, and overall health. The subsections below describe each of these causes, while Section V reviews the agency's efforts to tackle them.

Working Conditions

In exit surveys conducted during fiscal year 2024 and the first half of fiscal year 2025, employees identified the quality of TJJD's work environment and overall workloads as the main issues driving departures. Juvenile justice facilities are challenging environments where staff experience long shifts, high-risk youth behavior, and evolving agency practices that must remain responsive to youth needs and updated research. As a result, issues impacting working conditions are multi-faceted, affecting employee morale in different ways. Internal and external research demonstrates the following characteristics of facility conditions impact job satisfaction and retention:

- **Rising risks and needs of youth in custody.** TJJD's expectation for staff to serve as safe, responsible adults who consistently support structure for and rehabilitation of youth has not changed over time. However, the demographics of the youth with whom these employees interact has shifted significantly.

Youth are now entering TJJD facilities with more serious offense histories and higher-level rehabilitative needs. Prior to fiscal year 2021, murder was not in the top ten committing offenses. Between fiscal years 2013 and 2024, the number of youth entering state custody for capital murder or murder grew significantly from 5 to 44. Those entering with a determinate sentence — the sentence type reserved for youth who have committed the most serious offenses — increased by 115% from 93 in fiscal year 2020 to

200 youth in fiscal year 2024. Further, during the same period, the number of youth admitted to a TJJD facility with a moderate or high mental health treatment need more than doubled (from 185 to 425 youth). Additionally, the total number of youth in the state’s secure facilities is increasing — from about 550 youth each day in July 2022 to about 750 by September 2025. The Legislative Budget Board predicts the state secure facility population will increase to approximately 830 by 2027 and nearly 1,000 by 2030.¹⁷

Together, the rise in youth needs, risks, and overall population levels make the work of direct care staff more difficult. Each day, TJJD staff must manage more intensive and overlapping treatment needs, as over 95% of youth come into custody with two or more identified areas of need. At the same time, employees across agency positions must understand and directly address youths’ greater criminogenic risks. Without these simultaneous priorities, TJJD cannot meet legislative expectations to both protect the public and effectively rehabilitate youth who cannot be served safely elsewhere.

- **Inherent job risk.** Embedded within the Texas Model are principles designed to “catch behaviors low,” teach and reinforce emotional regulation, and de-escalate situations before dangerous incidents can occur. However, in a correctional environment serving youth demonstrating the highest-level risks in the state, the potential for violence and resulting staff injuries cannot be eliminated completely.

Between fiscal years 2020 and 2024, the number of youth admitted to TJJD with a high-level need for capital or serious violent offender treatment grew by 113% (from 180 to 384 youth). In recent years, the agency has developed the Violence Intervention Continuum, behavioral protocols, and debriefing procedures to improve rapid responses to, and ultimately decrease the incidence of, assaultive behavior. Still, the physical, social, and psychological impacts of serious incidents leave a mark on staff morale. In

¹⁷ Legislative Budget Board, *Biennial Report on Juvenile Justice Populations, Fiscal years 2018 to 2030*. Accessed 24 September 2025.
https://www.lbb.texas.gov/Documents/Publications/Policy_Report/8746_Juvenile_Justice_report.pdf

fact, research indicates employees in correctional environments tend to experience higher rates of PTSD, depression, suicide, heart disease, and shortened lifespan than the rest of the population.¹⁸

- **Feelings of mismatch in job expectations.** Depending on the stakeholder, individuals working in a correctional environment may be viewed as extensions of law enforcement who must maintain security or a type of social worker tasked with prioritizing the treatment of youth trauma. In reality, both skillsets are necessary to produce successful outcomes for youth, their families, and communities. However, maintaining the most effective balance between the two is a perpetual challenge, as this work requires constant monitoring and adjustment. The difficulty is amplified by evolving youth demographics and frequent change efforts, which staff have described as jarring when new leaders take over and new visions take hold. Overall, the mismatch and lack of consistency can create confusion, unrealistic job expectations, and reform fatigue that contribute to low morale and turnover.
- **Lack of flexibility.** Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, industries in most professions adapted and ultimately became accustomed to increased job flexibility, including opportunities to work from home and alter working hours. Most of these options cannot exist in a correctional setting. During the height of the pandemic, TJJD’s JCOs, case managers, MHPs, teachers, and many other employees continued to come to work at facilities that required 24/7 operational support. Their dedication kept youth and fellow staff members healthy and safe. However, the necessary rigidity of most TJJD positions hinders the agency’s ability to compete for qualified workers, particularly in the face of low pay and rural facility locations, as described below.

¹⁸ Wetzel, J. (2024, February 28). *Hearing on “The Nation’s Correctional Staffing Crisis: Assessing the Toll on Correctional Officers and Incarcerated Persons.”* Retrieved September 2, 2024, from https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2024-02-28_pm_-_testimony_-_wetzel.pdf; Walker, S. (2024, February 28). *Hearing on “The Nation’s Correctional Staffing Crisis: Assessing the Toll on Correctional Officers and Incarcerated Persons.”* Retrieved September 2, 2024, from https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2024-02-28_pm_-_testimony_-_walker1.pdf

Pay

Behind working conditions, low compensation ranks highest among staff members' concerns about TJJD employment. This aligns with sentiments in other states. In the aforementioned Council of State Governments' survey of state and local juvenile justice entities, many respondents stated that they lose employees to fast food restaurants and "big box" stores where staff can find both easier work and higher salaries.¹⁹ In Texas, TJJD has struggled to remain competitive not only with private businesses but also with other state agencies that perform similar work or engage with similar high-risk youth. For example, until the 88th Legislature's substantial investments in the juvenile justice system, TJJD's JCOs were typically compensated at lower rates than TDCJ's adult correctional officers. Similarly, average annual salaries for JCOs and case managers have historically fallen below those for caseworkers at the Department of Family and Protective Services, who work with a comparable youth population.

The 88th Regular Legislative Session approved 5% raises for fiscal years 2024 and 2025 for all state employees and provided TJJD with additional funding for JCO salary increases. The Legislature continued providing TJJD with critical investments during the 89th Regular Legislative Session, approving another 15% raise for all direct-care staff, including JCOs. The continued investments from the Legislature have increased correctional staff pay by approximately 51% since fiscal year 2022.

JCO Starting Pay, FYs 2018-2026

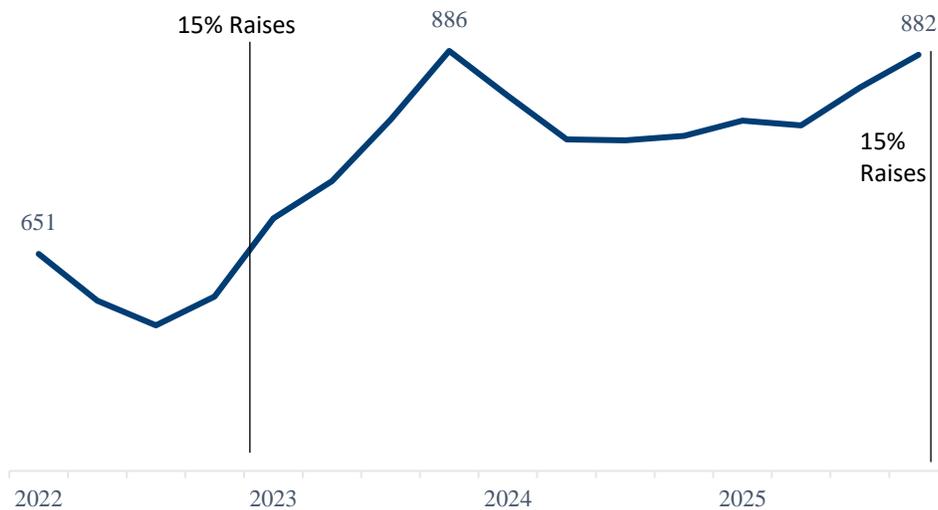
Fiscal Year	Pay	Percent Increase from the Previous Year
2018	\$31,512	-
2019	\$36,238	15%
2020	\$36,238	0%
2021	\$36,238	0%
2022	\$36,238	0%

¹⁹ The Council of State Governments Justice Center (October 2023). *Systems in Crisis: Revamping the Juvenile Justice Workforce and Core Strategies for Improving Public Safety and Youth Outcomes*. Retrieved September 2, 2024, from https://projects.csgjusticecenter.org/systems-in-crisis/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2023/10/Systems_in_Crisis_Brief-1.pdf.

2023	\$41,674	15%
2024	\$44,674	7%
2025	\$47,674	7%
2026	\$54,825	15%

The graph below shows the immediate positive impact of raises. Within months, TJJD was able to hire hundreds of additional JCOs. With more staff, the number of days that youth experienced outside of normal programming fell, alongside the number of suicide assessments that resulted in increased supervision levels (e.g., 1:1 ratios for youth demonstrating the greatest risk of danger or self-harm). Further, exit survey analyses showed a decrease in the number of JCOs citing pay as a reason for leaving the agency.

Average Monthly JCO FTEs by Fiscal Quarter, FYs 2022-2025



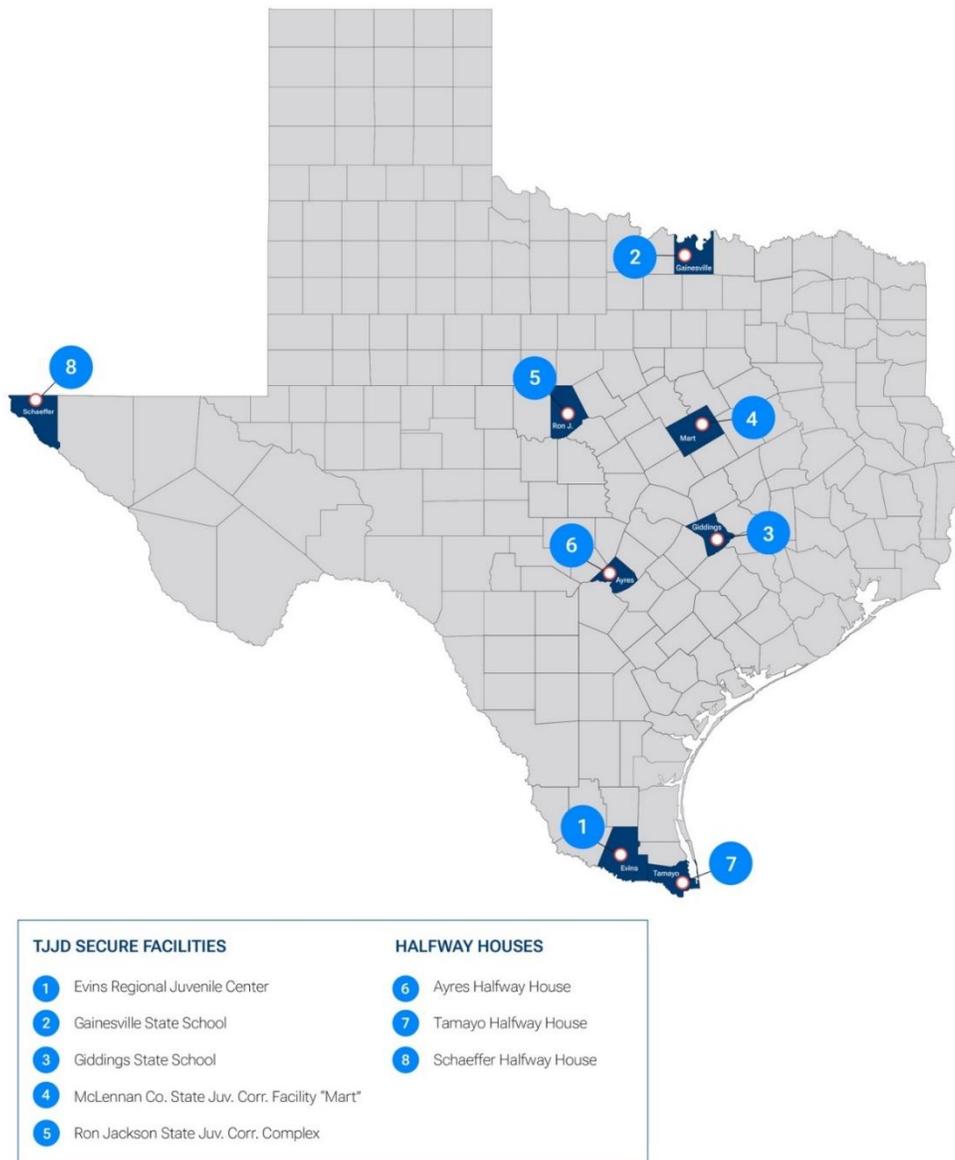
Notably, however, some of the gains resulting from pay increases were time-limited. For example, pay concerns in exit surveys returned to pre-raise levels and hiring fell slightly from its peak, leading to the slight decline shown above in JCO staffing strength. These changes demonstrate the powerful impact of economic factors like inflation, low unemployment levels,

and competition with other agencies and businesses, as well as the continued need to focus resources on improvements to culture and working conditions alongside pay.

Facility Locations

Current facility locations hinder TJJD’s ability to expand recruitment and retention initiatives. The map on the following page shows secure facilities are not located within or near the state’s largest population centers.

TJJD Secure Facilities and Halfway Houses



As shown in the table below, small labor forces coupled with low unemployment rates at four of TJJD’s five secure sites create hiring barriers. These geographic locations force TJJD to expand its recruitment reach farther away from each facility, lengthening commute times for potential employees who can decide between taking a distant and high-risk facility job or a work-from-home position offering competitive pay.

By contrast, the Evins facility shows the greatest staffing strength across the five locations. The area benefits from a larger overall population, higher unemployment rate, and highly structured culture of accountability. With better retention, agency leaders can also be more selective when hiring at the Evins facility, allowing TJJD to focus training resources on the most qualified, motivated, and mission-aligned job candidates. This further improves retention and reinforces a cycle of improved staffing strength at the facility.

Workforce Analysis at Facility Locations²⁰

Facility	County	Civilian Labor Force	Unemployed Persons	Unemployment Rate (%)	Staffing Strength ²¹
Evins	Hidalgo	397,837	26,748	6.7%	95%
Gainesville	Cooke	22,351	851	3.8%	79%
Giddings	Lee	9,294	356	3.8%	78%
Mart	McLennan	131,088	5,643	4.3%	87%
Ron Jackson	Brown	17,574	732	4.2%	85%
New Facility	Ellis	122,032	4,938	4.0%	NA
New Facility	Brazoria	199,300	9,536	4.8%	NA

While maintaining its existing facilities, TJJD is also actively working with state partners to expand state-level juvenile justice capacity in areas near population centers. During the 88th Regular Legislative Session, lawmakers adopted Rider 41 into TJJD’s bill pattern, which appropriated \$200 million for the expansion of state-level facility capacity by 200 beds. The

²⁰ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Force by County*, June 2024, accessed August 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/lau/tables.htm#mstate>.

²¹ Staffing strength represents the percent of needed JCO positions filled with available staff. Data in this column is current as of September 19, 2024.

Legislature provided an additional \$104 million during the 89th Session for the new builds. The project is both long-term and atypical, as a state agency has not directly built a new adult or juvenile correctional facility since 1997. The project offers opportunities to create spaces specifically designed for today's youth and staff using expertise from similar agencies in other states, treatment professionals, operational leaders, and risk managers.

TJJD is on-track to bring two new facilities, to be located in Ellis and Brazoria counties, online by 2028. Together, these facilities will serve youth with the highest-level mental health and aggressive behavior treatment needs, along with general population youth as appropriate. By building two facilities rather than one, the agency will target multiple labor pools in areas within or near population centers to reduce the risk of staffing shortages. See the agency's recent Rider 41 Report for more information on construction timelines, locations under consideration, and workforce analyses: <https://www.tjjd.texas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/TJJD-Rider-41-Report.pdf>.

Section V: Agency Initiatives and Next Steps

Identifying the causes of low staffing levels is straightforward, but addressing them systemically is far more complex. Improving recruitment and retention outcomes requires agency leadership to make data-driven decisions that are timely, thoughtful, and adaptive. Culture change is a gradual process, especially as staff are asked to implement new initiatives while navigating shifting youth demographics, economic fluctuations, and resource constraints. Nevertheless, TJJD is fully committed to meeting the challenges of both stability and innovation, and the agency takes responsibility for fostering the cultural change necessary to address these issues.

TJJD has received significant investment from the Legislature during both the 88th and 89th sessions, with a focus on the primary drivers of turnover: pay and facility locations. These investments have already made an impact, and continued funding in these areas remains crucial to sustaining the agency's progress. With higher salaries and, eventually, the ability to tap into larger labor pools near population centers, TJJD is poised to become a more competitive employer in the years ahead.

However, improving working conditions is the most challenging and time-consuming aspect of addressing turnover. The factors influencing staff morale and retention are complex and require multi-pronged solutions. To improve retention, the agency is implementing strategies that simultaneously boost morale, enhance safety, increase flexibility, and clarify staff expectations. Central to this effort is an agency-wide initiative that encourages staff to focus on their “vital few” — the core responsibilities that must take precedence over less essential tasks. While each employee’s vital few will differ, they are all aligned with the agency’s overarching goals, set by the executive director. These goals will evolve as staff achieve new levels of success. By integrating this framework into the daily workflow, TJJD ensures that staff can track their progress, identify areas for growth, and contribute to continuous improvement, all while taking ownership of the cultural transformation necessary for long-term success.

Strategies to Address Recruitment, Retention, and Morale

Below, TJJD has compiled a list that, while non-exhaustive, describes many initiatives employees are implementing each day to increase staffing strength and improve morale. The list contains efforts that the agency plans to continue or expand moving forward, subject to resource availability. For more information on any particular initiative, contact the agency at any time.

Notably, TJJD faces too many urgent issues to adopt only one innovation at a time. The initiatives highlighted below are occurring simultaneously, and measuring the unique impact of one effort versus another lies beyond staff's capacity. However, a review of internal surveys conducted between fiscal years 2019 and 2025 have shown a variety of positive outcomes following reform implementation, including:

- Increased job satisfaction;
- Increased feelings of safety in secure facilities;
- Increased feelings that an individual's role within the agency aligns with their skillset;
- Improved relationships and communication between supervisors and their direct reports;
- Increased perceptions of TJJD as a fair organization;
- Greater collective efficacy (i.e., an individual's belief about their group's ability to accomplish joint goals):
 - A stronger sense of camaraderie, trust, and connection between coworkers; and
 - Increased perceptions that staff share similar values and will provide assistance to each other when needed.

Efforts to Improve Recruitment and Job Flexibility

- **Streamlined the hiring process.** TJJD's Human Resources staff took various steps to improve the hiring process so divisions throughout the agency could better identify qualified candidates and bring them onto the team as quickly as possible. For example, staff expanded use of the state applicant tracking platform, automated background check processes, updated applications to make them more user-friendly, and instituted group interviews and preset questions where appropriate. The agency will keep looking for

opportunities to increase efficiencies within the hiring process. For example, the agency will work with other state agencies and criminal justice entities to review their hiring processes and make improvements as appropriate.

- **Implemented recruitment bonuses.** The agency uses various types of recruitment bonuses to expand its pool of available staff. Existing employees may receive a bonus for referring qualified individuals to serve as JCOs. Additionally, the agency offers bonuses to individuals who are hired for hard-to-fill positions or to work at understaffed facilities. Over the next fiscal year, TJJJ will continue using this incentive, subject to resource availability.
- **Hired recruiters to represent secure facilities and target hard-to-fill positions.** These recruiters lead efforts in and around communities surrounding secure facilities. Additionally, TJJJ's Manager of Recruitment and Retention works directly with universities and provider networks to develop a pipeline through which mental health professionals can intern for, contract with, or obtain full-time employment within TJJJ's treatment team. In fiscal year 2026, the agency plans to expand this pipeline to include additional universities, as well as target JCO and research positions.
- **Broadened outreach to community partners near secure facilities.** TJJJ recruiters and other staff work on the ground in Texas communities to connect with local organizations and workforce development professionals, attend job fairs, appear on radio programs, and distribute written materials about TJJJ employment opportunities. The agency aims to expand this outreach further by developing consistent relationships with local elected officials, community groups, and businesses.
- **Increased the development of promotional content.** TJJJ's communications team has ramped up the creation of both agency-wide and facility-specific materials aimed at supporting recruiters and staff in attracting applicants. These materials are part of a broader, more targeted effort to enhance outreach and engagement through more strategic communications. This year, the agency intends to further expand its communications team by increasing staffing support, enabling the team to better focus on developing and distributing content through new channels, including a regular e-newsletter. The e-newsletter will spotlight agency initiatives, job openings, and other key updates, reaching a wider audience with tailored messaging. Additionally, TJJJ is working with

consultants to update and refine our communications and social media presence, ensuring a more focused, impactful approach that effectively engages both prospective employees and the broader community.

- **Offered free supervision and training to MHPs.** TJJD continues to provide its MHPs with free supervision and training on cutting-edge treatment modalities such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing and Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics. TJJD also serves as a continuing education provider so MHPs can obtain training hours required by their respective licensing boards in part by attending internal professional development opportunities. Supervision and training opportunities allow the agency to attract and retain MHP applicants and “grow our own” professionals as they seek licensure. The agency aims to host its own mental health conference in the future to expand MHP recruitment gains and offer another professional development tool to existing employees.
- **Attended conferences, community gatherings, and other events whenever possible to connect with potential applicants.** Agency leadership tasked key employees, particularly treatment leaders, researchers, and probation support staff, with attending state and national events where they could act as TJJD’s ambassadors. This allows teams to develop relationships with and ultimately recruit experts in the juvenile justice field. Through this work, TJJD leaders connected with a renowned correctional researcher who now contracts with the agency to study recruitment, retention, and culture change initiatives, as discussed later in this section. TJJD will continue this effort moving forward, subject to funding availability.
- **Removed barriers to entry into agency positions.** The agency has reviewed and made changes to job qualifications where appropriate to remove unnecessary barriers while maintaining professionalism and safety. For example, while degrees are required for TJJD’s teachers to qualify for employment, certification is only preferred. This opens up opportunities for passionate and effective individuals to join TJJD’s team and continue receiving the professional development they require to move up on the agency’s career ladder. As needed, the agency will make similar changes to eligibility for other positions. Note, the agency has no current plans to update JCO eligibility requirements.

- **Prioritized internal bench-building initiatives.** TJJD has developed various programs and training opportunities to fill positions from within. These include assigned mentorships and leadership development initiatives within and across teams. The agency will continue to use these tools to identify, publicly acknowledge, and tap into existing talent.
- **Offered telehealth options as appropriate.** When possible, TJJD’s treatment professionals — particularly those contracted to provide medical services through the University of Texas Medical Branch — may use telehealth technology to assist youth remotely. The agency has been researching ways to increase access to tablets on campus for youth and staff, which may offer ways to expand these opportunities. However, expansion must also consider facility security and the efficacy of service delivery.
- **Joined professional networks to enhance recruitment connections.** For example, education leaders in the agency are members of the Texas Association of School Administrators, which allows the agency to benefit from learning opportunities and share job openings with fellow members. The agency will continue seeking out similar associations and community groups to assist recruiters with filling hard-to-staff positions.
- **Recruitment training for hiring managers.** The agency is collaborating with correctional industry experts to evaluate and enhance its hiring practices. This initiative aims to provide comprehensive training to TJJD leadership on best practices for recruitment and employee selection. Leadership has already undergone training focused on making strategic hires — focusing on candidates whose characteristics align with the agency’s mission, vision, values, goals, and foundational pillars. Going forward, this training will be extended to all levels of hiring managers across the system, ensuring a consistent and effective approach to talent acquisition.
- **College credits offered for training.** TJJD has partnered with Lamar College to provide college credits for JCOs who complete the training academy. As part of a partnership with Lamar State College Orange, New Hire Academy graduates are eligible for 12 hours of Criminal Justice college credit. Staff are enrolled with Lamar State College Orange on day 1 of New Hire Academy. After completion, grades are sent to Lamar State College Orange, and all graduates are eligible to convert their newly earned college credits toward a relevant degree or certification.

- **Creation of an advanced leadership academy.** An advanced leadership academy will equip TJJD professionals with the skills needed for senior leadership roles. The curriculum will be values-based, collaborative, and require attendance and participation in and out of the classroom. Lessons will include ethical leadership, strategic communications, team building and accountability, and crisis management. The course will combine in-person and virtual learning.

Efforts to Increase Employee Recognition, Support, and Advancement Opportunities

- **Revamped initial training.** As described in Section III, JCOs are the main employees driving TJJD’s high annual turnover rate. Some of these staff members rightfully determine early in training that juvenile justice work is not their calling. Others, however, require additional support to feel best equipped in their role. In 2024, TJJD altered the JCO training academy in a variety of ways to increase this support. For example, the academy now covers 240 hours of content (instead of 300) before new hires start working directly in a facility, as authorized in statute.²⁵ JCOs receive their remaining 60 hours of statutorily mandated training later within their first year. This allows the agency to meet legislative expectations while also providing an opportunity to bring new JCOs back together, hear about their experiences, and provide supplemental tools and support as needed. Prior to receiving the additional hours of training, TJJD provides a survey to each cohort so staff can actively identify particular topics they would like more training on; follow-up curricula cover these topics alongside additional required subject matter that help JCOs better contextualize and internalize after spending time in their role. Additionally, TJJD began pairing new staff with veteran employees to strengthen support structures. The agency also reviewed and updated training content to better align with on-the-job expectations while still complying with curriculum requirements set in statute. Within the next year, TJJD plans to develop multiple training tracks so employees can simultaneously receive regular reminders about foundation-level content and learn new skills that build upon the academy’s basics.
- **Increased facility leadership interaction with new hires.** The agency has taken steps to increase interactions between newly hired employees and the superintendents who lead, set expectations for, and steer culture change within each facility. All superintendents

meet with new hires during initial training in the JCO academy. Additionally, superintendents connect with new staff during formal group meetings and informal facility walkthroughs that occur regularly. Moving forward, the agency aims to standardize these connection opportunities so new staff can develop and maintain a direct link to leadership throughout their TJJD tenure.

- **Instituted increased pay for certain positions.** In addition to recruitment bonuses discussed in the previous subsection, the agency also offers bonuses, on-call pay, and increased compensation for employees who work with more challenging youth populations or during their off-hours. For example, JCOs who work on units that house youth with the highest-level mental health needs, including crisis stabilization, require specialized skills and therefore receive higher pay. Additionally, TJJD implemented a program in 2025 through which any employee could pitch ideas designed to increase safety in TJJD secure facilities; winners received a bonus for their participation, research, and commitment to process improvement. As resources are available, the agency will continue to allocate funding based on risk. The agency requested an update to its biennial funding formula to account for varying youth risks so resources can better address changing youth needs.
- **Implemented agency-wide performance evaluations.** TJJD developed and rolled out an annual performance evaluation process that enables each employee to receive direct feedback on their work. Moving forward, the agency aims to encourage the use of a six-month evaluation schedule and a 360-degree feedback process, where feasible, to make existing procedures more robust, timely, and inclusive.
- **Adopted 30-60-90 expectations for new hires and promoted staff.** To provide support and prioritize goal-setting as early as possible, TJJD implemented requirements for supervisors to set 30-, 60-, and 90-day plans with their new employees or recently promoted staff. As a result, direct reports and supervisors can remain on the same page, identify areas for growth, and work toward agreed-upon outcomes during the initial stages of an employee's new position. The agency will continue using this tool in the upcoming fiscal year and, where appropriate, will direct supervisors to align plans for staff in similar roles.

- **Formalized and refined the JCO career ladder.** Retaining staff requires agency leadership to develop and clarify opportunities for fair advancement through TJJD’s ranks. TJJD formalized its JCO career ladder to create a transparent pathway to advancement so employees know what is required to promote and when such opportunities are available. As appropriate, TJJD will make adjustments to the career ladder that align with changing agency initiatives, statutory directives, and improvements in retention outcomes.
- **Continued and expanded supervision training and sustainability.** TJJD has continued to educate and prepare incoming and up-and-coming supervisors at all levels and across all departments of the agency to become effective, communicative, and attentive leaders through its *Strengthening Supervision Training*, a series of professional development sessions that equips supervisors with valuable tools to help build professional, meaningful, intentional, and motivational relationships with their direct reports. The training introduces the simple but powerful principles of setting expectations, holding oneself and others accountable, meeting with direct reports consistently to address work-life needs, preparing for and having the necessary challenging conversations up and down the chain of command to address issues, self-reflecting on and strengthening leadership skills, solving problems together as a team, and avoiding burnout through daily self-care strategies. To ensure these tools and principles were firmly and continuously embedded into the agency supervision culture with fidelity, the staff targeted supervision sustainability efforts with the operations, treatment, and education departments at all five facilities while simultaneously expanding to halfway house, parole, and central office services (such as research and medical) supervisors. With plans to expand this next year to supervisors within the rest of central office services, the supervision sustainability program is currently being rolled out to the next major group in the agency, Agency Operations and Finance.
- **Established mentorship pairings.** Beyond day-to-day supervision, employees in leadership roles have also communicated a need for assistance with and attention on professional development. TJJD’s mentorship program uses feedback from supervisors to identify areas of growth for specific employees and match them with other staff who can provide additional support. The program aims to improve cross-agency communication,

demonstrate investment in employee needs, and promote a collaborative leadership model that aligns with TJJD's values. Over time, TJJD aims to formalize the program with clear procedures, timelines, and mentor/mentee selection guidelines.

- **Hired staff wellness counselors.** During the 88th Regular Legislative Session, lawmakers provided funding for three staff wellness counselors to support the agency. This team of clinicians addresses both professional and personal stressors that can impact employee morale and contribute to turnover. They offer free, confidential services to all staff members and, when appropriate, connect individuals to longer-term support such as counseling. Recognizing the higher-than-anticipated demand for these services, the agency requested funding to hire three additional counselors; although this request was not approved, the agency proactively reallocated existing resources to create an additional wellness counselor role, strengthening the team's capacity to meet staff needs.
- **Restructured support following serious incidents.** Risks are inherent in secure facilities, which requires TJJD to prioritize formal and consistent support structures for staff, particularly those who are injured on the job. After an incident occurs (such as an assault on staff or an employee's first restraint), TJJD holds debriefings with the staff member, not only to identify areas for improvement but also to check in on the employee's health, questions, and concerns. The staff wellness counselors mentioned in the previous bullet also follow up with staff to provide confidential support, as needed. The debriefing step is essential, as it allows facility leadership to prioritize staff well-being, which in turn, improves employee retention, facility safety, and youth rehabilitation.
- **Developed CARE teams at each facility and at the agency's headquarters.** Agency leadership has tasked each CARE team with creating opportunities to boost employee morale, recognize staff achievements, increase staff resilience, and enhance overall wellness. Since their rollout in fiscal year 2024, the teams have distributed weekly staff recognitions, hosted team-building events, and led staff trainings and other activities focused on health and wellness. The agency will continue to support these teams and review opportunities to incentivize participation in both team membership and events.
- **Prioritized team building within and across teams.** TJJD has implemented various trainings and group activities that stress the importance of authoritative leadership (i.e.,

leading by example and collaboration to accomplish shared goals) rather than authoritarian leadership (i.e., leading by relying on punishment and demands for compliance without question or flexibility). Similarly, the agency has used research to better understand and communicate about employees' differing workstyles to improve teamwork and morale.

Efforts to Increase Job Clarity, Improve Communication, and Manage Change

- **Aligned the JCO title with its duties.** Under a previous executive director, the agency changed the name of juvenile correctional officers to “youth development coaches.” After implementation, however, TJJJ found that the change caused confusion among applicants and negatively impacted job clarity. The agency has since reinstated the JCO title and plans to maintain this title moving forward.
- **Updated job descriptions and core competencies.** TJJJ’s Human Resources staff revamped the development process for job descriptions to minimize gaps between written descriptions and daily expectations. While staff often begin with job description language provided on SAO’s website, supervisors are now required to collaborate closely with Human Resources employees to tailor descriptions that best capture the functions and qualifications essential for success at TJJJ; this provides clarity to job applicants, direct reports, and supervisors alike. Additionally, TJJJ updated all core competencies to incorporate details about roles within the Texas Model. The agency will continue making necessary updates to align with youth needs and risks, statutory changes, and reform progress.
- **Updated function and facility names.** In fiscal year 2024, TJJJ changed the name of its school district to the Lone Star School District. The change helps to attract teacher applicants and aims to remove the taint of criminality from youth committed to state care, as directed by statute.²² In fiscal year 2025, the agency updated secure facility names so they are consistent across the state and more clearly aligned with job duties. The facilities are now the Evins, Gainesville, Giddings, Mart, and Ron Jackson State Juvenile Correctional Facilities.

²² Texas Family Code § 51.01(2)(B).

- **Increased staff training on change efforts.** TJJD has expanded training to ensure staff have the tools and common language they need to implement new initiatives. For example, beginning in the spring of 2024, TJJD began providing weekly ongoing training to all JCOs across facilities. TJJD is implementing a quarterly training schedule to formalize continuing education for JCOs each week.
- **Introduced pre- and in-shift briefings for direct care staff.** At TJJD’s largest facility (Mart), the agency implemented a system of briefings to ensure staff are up-to-speed on necessary information as shifts change. Campus-wide briefings occur at the beginning of each shift. During this time, outgoing staff provide information to incoming staff on key topics, such as youth behavior, incidents, and activities planned for the next shift. Incoming staff are required to review this information, clarify any uncertainties, and sign a document signaling they are ready to begin their work. The briefings help to reduce confusion, better equip staff for their immediate duties, and improve team collaboration. In October 2024, TJJD rolled out a similar process at all other secure facilities, incorporating changes as needed to accommodate local needs.
- **Expanded town hall opportunities.** Agency and facility leadership hold regular town halls in secure facilities to provide in-person support, answer questions, gather feedback, and communicate next steps on job expectations. Most importantly, town halls offer an opportunity to discuss the “why” behind a change so staff can understand and effectively implement new initiatives. In fiscal year 2025, the agency hosted virtual town halls, creating opportunities to better support staff who work in central office, halfway houses, and parole offices. The agency will continue using town halls to disseminate information and collect feedback.
- **Continued survey distribution to identify issues.** TJJD’s research team continues to conduct youth and staff surveys to identify progress and areas for growth. While some staff surveys incorporate all positions across the agency, others are targeted to help leaders better understand specific team cultures and needs. The agency will continue leveraging its research experts to analyze agency-wide and position-specific concerns that leadership staff may then address.
- **Revised policy development protocols.** The agency has prioritized the simplification of internal policies to focus on the principles of reform efforts, provide greater flexibility to

staff on the ground, and cut out unnecessary bureaucracy that causes frustration and fatigue. That way, policy directives will be actionable and trackable. Wherever possible, agency leadership has tasked supervisors with developing protocols that depend on documented processes, rather than individual personalities. TJJD uses the statutorily required rule review process and internal update procedures to analyze, revise, and disseminate policies across the agency, as needed.

Research Next Steps

As the agency implements and expands the strategies listed above, TJJD is working directly with researchers to help leaders better understand staff shortages, develop evidence-based solutions, and reliably measure outcomes. Internal researchers and data experts are actively distributing staff, youth, and customer service surveys while analyzing longitudinal data to act upon emerging trends. However, the small team lacks the capacity to manage large-scale projects essential for breaking the cycle of vacancies, burnout, and turnover.

To ensure forward movement, TJJD entered into a contract with a respected correctional researcher to assist the agency with a variety of tasks. Key goals include: optimizing data collection processes; employing mixed-methods research to assess annual progress toward system goals; and executing a long-term research plan to engage directly with staff regarding their needs, improve employee wellness, protect against known stressors, and analyze the impacts of recruitment and retention initiatives on agency culture. To further strengthen TJJD's internal research capacity, the research department is working to implement a strategy that empowers staff at all levels to conduct their own research. This approach will enable employees to collaborate on developing localized solutions that align with each facility's culture, context, and resources, with successful innovations being replicated across other facilities as needed.

In parallel, TJJD is in the process of partnering with Texas universities, including Sam Houston State University (SHSU) and Prairie View A&M University (PV A&M), to build external research capacity. These partnerships will support the agency in conducting large-scale, evidence-based research that strengthens practices across the county and state levels of the juvenile justice system. By working with these universities, TJJD will have access to cutting-

edge research journals, additional analytical expertise, and a broader pool of talent. The collaboration is expected to enhance the agency's ability to develop data-driven solutions, support its staff, and improve outcomes for the youth in its care. These university partnerships are currently in the process of being implemented, with plans for full integration in the near future.

Relevant Funding Requests

During the 89th Legislative Session, the department requested several exceptional items aimed at improving retention and recruitment. Similar to the previous session, the Legislature made substantial investments in areas critical to increasing staffing strength across the juvenile justice continuum. The agency continues to optimize its existing resources to enhance workforce stability. Looking ahead, agency leaders anticipate future requests in upcoming biennia to further advance successful initiatives in a thoughtful, iterative, and cost-effective manner.

In particular, lawmakers funded the following requests tied to topics discussed throughout this report:

- Salary increases for TJJD's direct care staff (\$16.7M) and UTMB operations (\$1.0M).
- Investments in county-level probation staff, particularly mental health professionals (\$26.8M).
- Funding for JCO uniforms (\$0.5M).
- Increases to support special education teachers, career and technical education instructors, and related technology (\$6.0M).
- Body scanners at each state facility and for five major county regions to increase youth safety and medical responses (\$1.4M).
- Application Modernization to enhance communications and data collection (\$9.0M).

See Appendix A for a full list of exceptional items that were funded during the 89th Regular Legislative Session for TJJD, the Office of Inspector General, and the Office of the Independent Ombudsman.

Conclusion

TJJD’s greatest asset is its people. The agency’s dedicated employees perform some of the toughest work in the state, always striving to ensure safety for youth, fellow staff members, and Texas communities. During an August 2024 board meeting, Executive Director Shandra Carter acknowledged staff for their ongoing commitment to juvenile justice, noting:²³

We have talented, compassionate, and innovative people working at this agency who are relentlessly committed to rehabilitating youth and keeping our communities safe. Despite what feels like endless scrutiny and criticism, they do not waver and stay focused on their mission. I am personally grateful for these folks and very proud of the team I lead.

Moving forward, the agency anticipates staffing strength will remain the most critical issue impacting workplace culture, facility operations, and system outcomes. TJJD is committed to working directly with the Legislature, county partners, and other stakeholders to address workforce issues in innovative ways. As the agency collects additional data on the impacts of its initiatives, staff will share insights with state leaders to further progress.

²³ Executive Director Carter’s full statement is posted on the agency’s website here: <https://www.tjtd.texas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Shandra-Carter-Statement-TJJD-Board-8-9-24.pdf>.

Appendix A: Exceptional Item Requests

The total base level funding received for TJJD, the Office of Inspector General (OIG), and the Office of the Independent Ombudsman (OIO) for the fiscal year 2026-2027 biennium is \$953.1M.

While TJJD, OIG, and OIO submit a joint legislative appropriations request, the entities develop their respective components of the request separately.

OIG is an independent law enforcement agency that keeps juvenile justice systems safe and secure. OIG staff are statutorily responsible for investigating criminal allegations involving TJJD youth, TJJD employees, TJJD facilities, contractors, volunteers, or programs. OIG also investigates allegations of abuse, neglect, and exploitation in all juvenile justice facilities across the state, including those operated at the county level of the system. The Chief Inspector General reports directly to the Texas Juvenile Justice Board, not to TJJD's executive director.

The Office of the Independent Ombudsman is an independent state agency tasked with investigating, evaluating, and securing the rights of post-adjudicated youth housed in local or state facilities, as well as youth on TJJD parole. The Chief Ombudsman reports to the Governor, not to TJJD's executive director or the Texas Juvenile Justice Board.

TJJD Exceptional Items Funded

TJJD Direct Care Salary Increase (\$19.3M)

TJJD requested a 15% increase in the Juvenile Correctional Officer career ladder. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Probation Staff Investment (\$26.8M)

The 88th Legislature provided funding for a 5% salary increase for select Juvenile Probation Department (JPD) positions in fiscal years 2024 and 2025. This request for fiscal years 2026 and 2027 included a 10% increase for vacant positions to help meet staffing needs and a 10.25%

increase for JPD mental health positions, which were not included in the previous funding. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Pre- and Post-Adjudication and Regionalization Funding (\$6.5M)

To address rising costs, TJJD requested a 25% increase in state aid for Strategy A.1.4 (Pre- and Post- Adjudication Facilities) and Strategy A.1.8 (Regional Diversion Funding), allowing JPDs to maintain their current number of residential placements and regional diversions. The Legislature partially funded this item.

Special Education and Career Technology Education Resources (\$6.0M)

The growing number of students requiring special education services has created a critical need for additional special education teachers. Similarly, more Career and Technical Education (CTE) instructors are needed to equip students with employable skills and industry certifications. The Legislature provided an increase in Foundation School Program Funding that fully funded this item.

Determinate-Sentenced Offender Program (\$0.4M)

With a growing population of determinate-sentenced offenders (DSOs) committed to state custody, TJJD needs more staff on the DSO team to ensure timely and informed decisions for public safety. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation Legislative Mandate (\$1M)

To comply with legislative mandates, TJJD requested funding for implementation of SB 1849, including additional attorneys and legal assistance to support the development and maintenance of a misconduct search engine. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Application Modernization (\$4.5M)

TJJD currently has 24 applications that are running on outdated, obsolete, and unsupported technology. This request is to fund the modernization of seven of those applications and continued funding in the future to address the entire need. Continuing to operate these vulnerable

systems is inefficient, costly, and puts TJJD and JPDs that use these systems at significant risk. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Vehicle Refresh (\$6.4M)

The Comptroller of Public Accounts recommends that agencies evaluate vehicles for replacement once they have been in operation for nine years and reached 100K miles. TJJD received \$5.7M, OIG received \$0.5M, and OIO received \$0.1M for vehicle refresh.

PREA Compliance Analyst (\$0.7M)

TJJD received a grant from the Office of the Governor to support PREA-related initiatives within our residential operations. This grant is being used to fund five Compliance Analyst positions. These positions review, monitor, and evaluate agency residential programs through the use of established technology and systematic data, and determine compliance with PREA's Juvenile Facility Standards and TJJD policies. Since the inception of the positions, the Compliance Analysts have been instrumental in identifying and detecting policy violations by staff and aiding in the prevention of critical incidents within TJJD. The Legislature fully funded this item to maintain analyst positions after the grant's expiration.

Computer Refresh (\$1.6M)

TJJD requested funding to replace outdated laptops, ensuring security and efficiency for staff. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Life Safety and Preventative Maintenance (\$5.0M)

TJJD requested funding for critical facility maintenance and safety upgrades. The Legislature fully funded this item.

UTMB Nurse Pay (\$0.5M)

TJJD requested funding to align the salaries of UTMB medical personnel with their counterparts in other agencies. The Legislature fully funded this item.

OIG Exceptional Items Funded

Peace Officer Salary for Security Officers and Police Communicators (\$0.8M)

OIG requested funding to align the salaries of OIG peace officers with their counterparts in state law enforcement under Schedule C. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Canine Contraband Detection (\$0.05M)

OIG requested funding to re-establish and maintain a narcotics canine detection unit within OIG. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Complaints Database and Investigation Database Annual Cost (\$0.01M)

OIG requested funding to support the annual service maintenance fee for OIG's computer intake, referral, and investigations database. The Legislature funded this item through HB 500.

Video and Audio Recording Interview Rooms at Secure Facilities (\$0.1M)

OIG requested funding to establish designated interview rooms equipped with audio and video capabilities. The Legislature funded this item through HB 500.

Peace Officer Safety Equipment (\$0.4M)

OIG requested funding to refresh ballistic vests, rifle rated ballistic vests, helmets, shields, and body worn cameras. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Law Enforcement Equipped Vehicles (\$0.6M) – see vehicle refresh above

OIG Operating Cost (\$0.1M)

OIG requested funding to increase OIG operating support to cover equipment, uniforms, supplies, training, and travel. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation Investigative Unit (\$1.1M)

OIG requested funding to support seven additional FTEs for investigators and supervisors to increase investigation response and ability at county-operated facilities and probation departments, vehicles, and equipment. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Law Enforcement Operations-Special Operations (\$2.7M)

OIG requested funding to support 13 FTEs for peace officers and supervisors responsible for fugitive apprehension of escaped and absconded youth, use of force review, and canine contraband detection FTEs, vehicles, and equipment. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Criminal Investigations (\$1.4M)

OIG requested funding to support eight FTEs for peace officers and supervisors responsible for conducting criminal investigations, vehicles, and equipment. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Gatehouse Entry Security Operations (\$1.3M)

OIG requested funding to support five FTEs for peace officers, investigators, and supervisors responsible for gatehouse and exterior facility security, entry searches, and escape response, and equipment funding. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Incident Reporting Center (\$0.1M)

OIG requested funding to support one FTE police communicator for the incident reporting center hotline calls, reports, and complaints. The Legislature fully funded this item.

OIG Training Division (\$0.6M)

OIG requested funding to support four FTEs for peace officers and supervisors responsible for training and coordination of training of OIG staff, vehicles, and equipment. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Investigative Support Services (\$0.6M)

OIG requested funding to support six FTEs for investigators and a supervisor to provide support to investigators, review audio and video, review recorded phone calls for intelligence and prevention, vehicles, and equipment. The Legislature fully funded this item.

OIO Exceptional Items Funded

OIO Priority 1. OIO Maintain Operations (\$0.8M)

OIG requested three additional FTEs and operating funds to address increased responsibilities that that have undertaken over time, such as services to youth on the waitlist, further expanding the scope of our work. The Legislature fully funded this item.

OIO Training (\$30K)

Human Resources Code Section 261.103 mandates OIO to attend annual training sessions, including the training curriculum for JCOs. It also allows for participation in other relevant annual training opportunities. However, due to budget constraints, OIO staff have been unable to attend these required trainings for several years. To ensure compliance with this statutory requirement and to improve the skills and knowledge of our staff, OIO requested funding to cover the costs associated with these training sessions. Attending these trainings will not only fulfill the legal mandate but will also equip our staff with the latest best practices, improving the quality of services we provide to the youth in our care. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Sunset Recommendations (\$0.2M)

To comply with the recommendations adopted by the Sunset Commission, OIO requested funding to support one Data Analyst. The Data Analyst will be essential in improving our ability to track, analyze, and report on key performance metrics, ensuring data-driven decision-making and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the OIO. This additional FTE is necessary to ensure that OIO continues to meet its expanded responsibilities and to fulfill the recommendations outlined by the Sunset Commission. The Legislature fully funded this item.

Vehicle Refresh (\$0.2M) – see above