



Response to the Independent Ombudsman First Quarter Report, FY 2025 September 23, 2025

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) received the First Quarter Report for Fiscal Year 2025 from the Office of the Independent Ombudsman (OIO) on September 3, 2025. The report covers the time period between September and November 2024. The following provides a response to the report and updates on ongoing agency efforts.

General Updates and Staffing Information

In alignment with TJJD's response to the previous quarterly report — published in May 2025 — the agency agrees with OIO's analysis that staff vacancies were the most serious problem facing the juvenile justice system during the first quarter of fiscal year 2025. Recruiting and retention remain major challenges at TJJD, and the agency continues to dedicate significant time and resources to making improvements. As we implement changes, we appreciate OIO's assistance and insight, particularly on issues related to safe operations and training.

As reported in previous responses, the agency has made progress since the height of our staffing crisis in mid-2022. Between the end of fiscal years 2022 and 2025, the agency increased its staffing strength by nearly 300 juvenile correctional officers (JCOs). With more staff resources, TJJD's secure facilities absorbed 200 additional youth, increasing the average daily youth population from about 550 to 750. To begin September 2025, TJJD had an estimated need for 911 JCOs (*compared to 904 in our last report response*); 848 of these positions were filled (*compared to 804 in our last report response*). Across secure facilities, 683 JCOs were available to provide sole supervision to committed youth (*compared to 640 in our last report response*). This equates to about 75 percent of needed positions filled with available staff.¹

Despite increases in staffing levels and strength, TJJD still manages a waitlist of committed youth who require state care. Throughout fiscal year 2025, the agency moved over 550 youth off of the waitlist and into secure facilities. As of September 22, 146 youth were waiting at the county level of the system for a staffed state bed.

During the Texas Juvenile Justice Board's public meeting in September 2025, agency staff provided an overview of commitment and waitlist trends.² Notably, data continues to show an increase in the number and percentage of youth entering state custody with more intensive treatment needs. Additionally, commitments have gone up, rising by about 13 percent between fiscal years 2022 and 2025. To better accommodate more youth with high-acuity needs, TJJD has expanded programming through the implementation of Dialectal Behavior Therapy, integrated

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

² To view the presentation, visit the archived video of the public meeting [here](#).

treatment plans, innovative vocational training, and targeted initiatives focused on behavior change, such as token economies. The agency continues to monitor the impacts of these changes, but initial outcomes appear promising. For example, 30 days after the launch of a token economy pilot program, the agency saw reductions in assaults and suicide alerts on participating dorms — both of which contribute to staff retention.

Employee turnover will remain the agency’s focus through fiscal year 2026. The bullets below provide information on several recent and upcoming efforts to improve staffing strength, absorb the waitlist, and achieve TJJD’s mission efficiently. For more a more comprehensive list of staffing projects, see the agency’s Human Resources Management Plan, which will be published online by October 1.³

- *Employee pay:* Before the 89th legislative session, TJJD partnered with expert economists to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the salaries necessary to attract and retain qualified JCOs. The findings directly informed the agency’s request for a 15 percent pay increase for certain direct-care staff, including JCOs. After providing similar raises during the 88th legislative session, lawmakers again invested in juvenile justice professionals, allowing TJJD to boost JCO salaries beginning in September 2025. The Legislature also provided critical resources to raise salaries for county probation staff, increase support to teachers offering special education and vocational programming in state facilities, and add staff to assist with programs related to youth with the most serious offense histories.
- *Agency culture:* TJJD continues to hone its training, onboarding, supervision, and monitoring procedures to better support staff. For example, supervision sustainability measures implemented over the past fiscal year help to ensure that employees have the tools they need to complete their duties. The agency is also partnering with recruitment and retention experts to align hiring efforts with best practices. To monitor the progress of widespread initiatives, TJJD’s research team is finalizing an agencywide survey that will help decision makers assess and timely respond to feedback on employee morale, turnover, and burnout. The survey will launch in January 2026.
- *Facility locations:* In 2023, lawmakers appropriated \$200 million to TJJD for the expansion of state juvenile justice capacity by 200 beds in areas that can fill the agency’s workforce gaps. TJJD partnered with state and county stakeholders to identify sites in Ellis and Brazoria counties for two facilities that will focus on youth with high-level mental health and violent behavior treatment needs. In 2025, the Legislature approved these sites and provided additional funding to ensure TJJD can complete the project by 2028. Since securing site approval, the agency has worked with experts to develop design plans that will best meet staff and youth needs moving forward.

Other Major Initiatives

In addition to the projects described above, TJJD staff remain engaged in constant process improvement initiatives designed to enhance agency efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency. While not exhaustive, the information below highlights key priorities over the next several months.

Long-term strategic planning: As previously reported, Board Chair Manny Ramirez directed staff to begin developing a 10-year strategic plan that would map out a clear vision for the juvenile

³ TJJD’s bill pattern in the General Appropriations Act requires the agency to develop an annual plan to improve employee morale and retention. To review TJJD’s plan from October 2024, visit the agency’s website [here](#).

justice continuum. The planning process is a continuation of TJJD's work with the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute to map local resource gaps that contribute to state commitments. To consolidate and streamline plans for filling these gaps, TJJD partnered with the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC). With HHSC's assistance, the agency and our county probation stakeholders will prioritize opportunities shallow in the system to address youth needs more quickly and efficiently.

Training and staff professionalism: In fiscal year 2025, TJJD took various steps to review and revamp JCO training. For example, staff updated the agency's de-escalation curriculum and new hire training academy to emphasize core correctional practices. TJJD also partnered with Lamar State College to offer staff college credit for completing the academy. Employees can then apply these credits toward criminal justice certifications or degrees that Lamar offers.

Team reorganization: The agency started fiscal year 2026 with multiple team reorganizations in process. For example, TJJD revamped the probation and parole services teams to improve coordination across these critical functions. Moving forward, seven regional managers will support youth in the community, both those served at the county level of the system and those exiting state-level care. Additionally, seven continuum of care coordinators will help each probation region fill the service gaps that the agency is seeking to address in our long-term strategic plan. Finally, updates to TJJD's Release Review Panel spurred by statutory changes during the 89th legislative session will better align decision-making procedures with best practices in treatment delivery.

Grantmaking: During the summer of 2025, TJJD completed another productive grant cycle designed to support local service needs. TJJD approved 14 applications from juvenile probation departments for community-based services, totaling about \$1.75 million. The agency also approved seven applications for residential services, totaling about \$1.5 million. Additionally, three counties received funding to support vocational programming, totaling \$250,000. While demand for grant dollars outstripped supply, the cycle provided critical information on funding and process improvement opportunities to pursue in upcoming fiscal years.

Technology updates: After successfully launching the CONNECT system in March 2025, TJJD received additional funding from the Legislature to refresh other outdated agency applications. Across the biennium, TJJD now has the financial support necessary to tackle projects that will improve grant support for county probation departments and overhaul monitoring technology in both county- and state-level facilities, among other priorities.