



**Response to the Independent Ombudsman
Second Quarter Report, FY 2025
October 22, 2025**

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) received the Second Quarter Report for Fiscal Year 2025 from the Office of the Independent Ombudsman (OIO) on October 3, 2025. The report covers the time period between December 2024 and February 2025. 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 previous quarterly reports, the agency agrees with OIO's analysis that staff vacancies were the most serious problem facing the juvenile justice system during the second quarter of fiscal year 2025. Recruitment 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.

Staffing issues are too dynamic and urgent to implement only one solution at a time. Over the past several years, TJJD has executed a variety of initiatives simultaneously. As noted in previous responses, these efforts include but are not limited to:

- Working with the Office of the Governor and Texas Legislature to increase pay for direct-care staff, particularly juvenile correctional officers (JCOs);¹
- Implementing recruitment bonuses and higher pay for hard-to-fill or high-risk positions;
- Expanding recruitment and outreach activities in communities surrounding secure facilities;
- Streamlining the hiring process so the agency can better identify qualified job candidates and bring them onto the team as efficiently as possible;
- Updating initial and ongoing training to help staff understand and execute on-the-job expectations (see more below);
- Expanding training for supervisors to strengthen the agency's bench of leaders and ensure direct reports receive the support they need to fulfill the agency's mission; and
- Gaining approval of and developing initial designs for two new state secure facilities located near population centers.

For a more thorough list of the agency's recruitment and retention strategies, see the Annual HR Management Plan, as required by Rider 35 of TJJD's bill pattern.²

¹ The most recent raise went into effect on September 1, 2025, after the Legislature passed the FY2026-27 General Appropriations Act during the 89th regular session.

² 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 published in October 2025, visit the agency's website [here](#).

These initiatives have helped the agency make significant progress since the height of our staffing crisis in mid-2022. Between the end of fiscal years 2022 and 2025, TJJJ increased its staffing strength by nearly 300 JCOs. With more staff resources, TJJJ's secure facilities absorbed 200 additional youth, increasing the average daily youth population from about 550 to 750. At the beginning of October 2025, TJJJ had an estimated need for 911 JCOs; 836 of needed positions were filled. Across secure facilities, 661 JCOs were available to provide sole supervision to committed youth. This equates to about 73% of needed positions filled with available staff.³

Despite increases in staffing levels, TJJJ 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 October 20, 148 youth were waiting at the county level of the system for a staffed state bed. To expand staffing success and decrease the waitlist, TJJJ is now partnering with recruitment and retention experts to align agency procedures with best practices. Additionally, the agency continues to work with stakeholders on increasing local capacity so more youth can stay closer to home and out of state custody, when appropriate.

OIO's Second Quarter Report also highlights concerns with assaults that occur in state facilities. Safety for youth, staff, and Texas communities is fundamental to TJJJ's mission and remains the agency's top priority. However, the strategies used to maintain safety have evolved over time as youth treatment needs have intensified. Between FY2016 and FY2025, the number of youth admitted to state facilities fell by 33% (from 823 youth to 548). During this same timeframe, the number of youth admitted with high-level violent behavior treatment needs rose by 179% (from 127 youth to 354). Those admitted with a high- or moderate-level mental health treatment need rose by 70% (from 253 youth to 431).

The agency has taken a multi-pronged approach to addressing youths' rising treatment needs and related behaviors. For example, TJJJ has expanded programming through the implementation of the Violence Intervention Continuum, egregious behavior protocol, Dialectal Behavior Therapy, integrated treatment plans, and targeted initiatives focused on behavior change, such as token economies. The agency also adjusted facility populations to increase safety and security. In March (Q3 of FY2025), TJJJ shifted the most intensive programs within the Violence Intervention Continuum from the Evins facility to Mart, where youth with challenging behaviors could benefit from more tenured team leaders and a more correctional physical setting. Following the move, data showed assaults at Evins decreased; at the same time, assaults increased at Mart but not as sharply as the decline at Evins, indicating an overall decrease in incidents.

Additionally, TJJJ identified the need to update its training curriculum and training academy structure. While OIO highlights a concern with JCO curriculum or delivery of the curriculum, the focus to provide enhanced training in a structure that meets the need of staff is two-fold. First, TJJJ identified the need to update certain curriculum to incorporate new skills necessary to increase JCO job-readiness. Since Spring 2025, TJJJ has updated its de-escalation curriculum, curriculum on managing the milieu, and curriculum on engaging with youth. Each updated curriculum now places a higher emphasis on crisis management. TJJJ partnered with various criminal justice agencies to pull industry best practices and tailor the curriculum to meet staff

³ TJJJ defines "available staff" as filled JCO positions minus unavailable staff (e.g., staff in pre-service training for their first 60 days or those on extended leave, such as military or FMLA leave).

needs. TJJD is also finalizing changes to its use of force curriculum and developing specific behavior shaping curriculum for JCOs.

Second, the handoff from the Juvenile Justice Training Academy (JJTA) to dorm leadership needed an upgrade. It does not matter how great a training program or curriculum is if new hires are not supported on the dorm and supported appropriately by their dorm leadership. Beginning in June 2025 with a pilot at Giddings, and since rolled out to three of the five secure facilities, TJJD overhauled the entire structure of the JJTA for JCOs. The academy model now includes three weeks of on-the-job training directly with the JCO's dorm leadership. During this OJT, staff learn how to run programming in the milieu while they are placed with Facility Resource Officers. This allows new staff more time to see how the fundamentals and skills learned in the academy can be applied with youth and see how youth engagement and de-escalation should work in real-time. Staff then return to the JJTA to test out of subjects before being released back to the facility as sole-supervised JCOs. The updated curriculum paired with the restructuring of the entire academy will better equip staff manage and improve youth behavior.

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, all of which were also reflected in the response to OIO's First Quarter Report.

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

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, TJJJ received additional funding from the Legislature to refresh other outdated agency applications. Across the biennium, TJJJ 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.