



CCYJ Stands Firmly in Support of the Elimination of Detention for Runaway Youth

Washington needs to change its response to youth who run away, skip school, or commit other “[status offenses](#).” Currently, we send hundreds of these youth to juvenile detention each year despite the fact that they have not committed a crime. These young people are individuals in crisis— coping with family conflict, surviving challenging foster care placements, or facing commercial sexual exploitation. They are among those who need the support of our systems of care the most. But, as a state, we have not yet found a way to consistently provide the care they desperately need, instead placing them in juvenile detention facilities in an effort to keep them safe.

We must question the means by which we are trying to protect at-risk youth. Research shows that using detention as an intervention does not work for its intended purpose and does not produce the long-term results we care about and intend to produce: keeping our children and youth safe, healthy, and well. It is costly, an inappropriate response to non-criminal offenses, and perpetuates the disproportionate involvement of communities of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged youth and families in the justice system.

At CCYJ, we recognize that the use of detention in status offense cases causes irreparable harm to the youth the system is meant to be protecting. Yet, as it currently stands, Washington State lacks the therapeutic services and resources that our children, youth, and families in crisis need most. Instead of serving the needs of at-risk youth and families, Washington has tasked its juvenile justice system with responsibilities that it is inherently ill-equipped to perform. These gaps in our systems have left judges with the impossible choice of putting children behind bars or releasing them to the dangers of living unsupported in our communities, facing sexual exploitation, rape, and death, among other risks. We believe this is wholly unacceptable.

The choice should not be between opting for the lesser of two evils— either detention or release to danger without services. **Instead, the real choice we face is between accepting a currently dysfunctional system, or creating a better one – a system that is designed with and for the communities it serves.** CCYJ is relentlessly committed to the latter; it is our mission.

Every day for the past 13 years, we have worked alongside our partners across the state to meet the needs of those most impacted by the use of detention—individuals in foster care, children who have been commercially sexually exploited, LGBTQ+ youth, kids struggling with truancy, and youth who runaway. From this work, we know that creating and delivering services that best address the needs of our most vulnerable young people is, and will continue to be, a challenge.



As we learned from the tragic loss of [Rebecca “Becca” Headman](#), a young teenager murdered by a sex trafficker, the decisions we make in an effort to address the needs of at-risk youth can have life and death consequences. While we understand both the historical and ongoing contexts of using detention as the mechanism to keep youth from returning to harmful and life threatening environments, we cannot let this limit our vision of what is possible.

It’s time to shift our context from fear driven practices. We must embrace proactive and just solutions that address our shared purpose collectively: keeping our kids safe, healthy, and well; in school; and out of the juvenile justice system. Without necessary community-based, trauma-informed, and culturally-responsive resources to meet these needs, eliminating the use of detention only solves part of the problem. Standing alone, it is likely to create more--and potentially worse--inequities with inconsistent judicial practices around the state. We will need data-driven research to identify what works and the political will to direct full financial investment in effective interventions.

The time for change is now. Eliminating unnecessary and harmful detention is long overdue in Washington State. Our children need and deserve a comprehensive investment by our policy makers in community-based resources that address and treat their underlying needs. It is our responsibility to make this new system a reality.

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