

Testimony on H.B. 24, Funding for Juvenile Probation Officers

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January 31, 1991

Good Morning. My name is Nancy Rorem. I am the Deputy Director for the Pennsylvania State Association of County Commissioners. I appreciate being given the time to appear before you today on an issue of high priority to Pennsylvania's counties and Pennsylvania's children; the funding of juvenile probation officer salaries.

The PSACC and its affiliate organization, the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators, have testified on at least five different occasions regarding changes needed in the children and youth system. Each time, one of the key provisions we have sought has been the funding of juvenile probation officers' salaries. We currently have in place a program granting counties 80% of the salary costs attributable to provisions of adult probation services. It has greatly increased counties' capacity to provide adult probation services, but no comparable provision exists for juvenile probation.

H.B. 24 reflects this concern and it receives our wholehearted support.

There are four criteria by which we have reviewed H.B. 24. Let me outline them for you. First, the funding of juvenile probation officers recognizes the core services necessary for a well functioning county-based juvenile delinquency system. In the past, judges made decisions about the placement of juveniles based on which facility had an available bed. Too often when the

juvenile returned to the community, there was very little to offer and as a result, there were repeat violations and repeat placements. For the last several years, some judges have been recognizing both the safety needs of the community and the transition needs of the juvenile and have become much more involved in the development of the local juvenile delinquency system. Their agents in providing better community services are the juvenile probation officers.

Second, we fully support the Juvenile Court Judges Commission as the state administering agency. The JCJC has a peer relationship with Pennsylvania's judges. We know that commissioners learn best from other commissioners and, we assume the same is true of judges. In addition, the JCJC has proven its effectiveness in administration through its current grant programs of intensive probation and after care. Both programs have promoted innovation, and at the same time have fostered compliance with program standards that show measurable success.

Third, we support the provision for funds to provide training. One of the things that the JCJC has shown us is the importance of training in employee retention. On average, county human service programs are seeing an employee turn over rate of 25 to 40 percent a year. Exit interviews done with employees have shown us that our workers do not feel well trained and therefore do not feel confident that they can do what we are asking them to do. The turnover rate of juvenile probation officers is about 10%.

We believe that there is a real benefit to the kind of training and personalized interaction between the JCJC and county programs.

Finally, we support H.B. 24 because we see the adequate funding of probation salaries as a major factor in the continuing overmatch battle. Overmatch is the term referring to the amount of county tax dollars we are compelled to put into the children and youth system above our statutorily-required match.

Child abuse and neglect cases are up, but so too are the number of cases involving juvenile delinquents. Using 1989 data, the state presently picks up about 66% of the cost associated with child abuse and neglect. The state picks up only 33% of the costs associated with juvenile delinquency. Unfortunately, there are rewards in the system to hire an adequate number of staff for abuse and neglect cases, but there is no reward at all for hiring an adequate number of staff for juvenile delinquents.

This system has further consequences. The thirty or so counties able to operate without the need to contribute overmatch receive 50% reimbursement from the state if they place a juvenile and keep the juvenile in placement and no reimbursement if they try to supervise the juvenile in the community. Clearly we are providing incentives for the wrong behavior. This reward system is at least a part of what continues to drive up the cost of the child welfare system.

We sincerely hope that you will give our comments due consideration as you debate the merits of this legislation. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have or get you more information as you need it.

Thank you.