

TESTIMONY PRESENTED
to the
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
CONCERNING STATE SUBSIDY
FOR JUVENILE PROBATION OFFICERS

Presented By

Stephen J. Suknaic

Director of the Dauphin County

Juvenile Probation Office

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Introduction/Background

Good Morning. My name is Stephen J. Suknaic and I am the Director of the Dauphin County Juvenile Probation Office, and a member of the Executive Committee of the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you the current and future status of state subsidy for juvenile probation officers and services in our commonwealth.

Last January members of the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers and others testified before you in support of H.B. 24 which would raise the level of state subsidy for juvenile probation officers to 80% from its current level of approximately 10%. As you know, this bill has not yet become law but I am hopeful that it will. However, in the meantime some significant progress was made with your help. Through your child welfare reform initiative the grant-in-aid of the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission (J.C.J.C.) to county juvenile probation offices was increased for FY 1991-92 from \$3.2 million to \$5.5 million. The new monies were to be used to develop programs and expand juvenile probation services so that costly institutional placements of juvenile offenders could be reduced without risk to public safety. I appreciate and thank you for your effort in this endeavor but I regret to inform you that the counties have not received a single dollar of the new money from the J.C.J.C. grant-in-aid.

Current Crisis

In a memo dated December 17, 1991 the J.C.J.C. notified counties that the entire \$5.5 million grant-in-aid for county juvenile probation services had been placed in budgetary reserve by the Governor's Office. This came as an absolute shock without advance warning to county commissioners, juvenile court judges, and county probation officials. Not only was this message shocking and devastating to county officials but it was received after the counties had finalized their budgets for calendar year 1992. It left the counties helpless to explore fiscal options with their own dollars. This message also came at a time when many counties are battling increases in the quantity and severity of juvenile crime.

Impact of Current Crisis

Prior to notification of the J.C.J.C. grant-in-aid being placed in budgetary reserve, counties were looking forward to taking significant steps forward in their development of juvenile probation services. Counties were preparing methods to improve and expand probation programs of supervision and rehabilitation. These probation programs would also help reduce commitments of juvenile offenders to institutions which now cost approximately \$100 per day. Now, instead of taking significant steps forward, counties are faced with no other option but to take several significant steps backward. A few of these backward steps include:

- (1) Most counties will discontinue the testing of juvenile offenders for drug and alcohol use. This has become a valuable aspect of probation supervision in recent years.

- (2) Training and professional development workshops and seminars will be discontinued or significantly reduced by most counties.
- (3) Many counties are planning to reduce their number of juvenile probation officers by creating a hiring freeze so that when resignations occur they will not be filled. This will significantly reduce the quality of supervision of juvenile offenders in our communities.
- (4) Some counties are planning to terminate juvenile probation officers in the near future because their salaries were funded by the J.C.J.C. grant-in-aid.
- (5) Most counties will be forced to lower standards of supervision. For example, juvenile offenders who were on "intensive probation supervision" and seen two or three times per week will be seen only once a week by a juvenile probation officer. Juvenile offenders who were being visited twice each month will be seen only once a month by a juvenile probation officer. Obviously, this will result in an increased likelihood for recidivism.
- (6) Many courts will recognize these lower standards of service and resulting lower standards of public safety regarding juvenile offenders. Judges will be forced to institutionalize some juvenile offenders because intensive, in-home programs of supervision and rehabilitation will be less frequently available.

Future of the Grant-in-Aid

I am sure that other cutback decisions will also have to be implemented by counties if this grant-in-aid is kept in budgetary reserve. This budgetary reserve tactic will in the long-run be very costly to the counties and the

state because it will ultimately result in an increase in the number of juvenile offenders committed to institutions at a cost of approximately \$24,000 each (\$100/day X 240 days).

This grant-in-aid of the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission is vital to the juvenile justice system in Pennsylvania. For example, our juvenile probation services operation budget in Dauphin County for 1992 is \$1.3 million, and our grant-in-aid from the J.C.J.C. was to offset \$115,079 of that budget for the first six months of 1992. A similar or higher figure was anticipated for the latter six months of 1992. The loss of this grant-in-aid will result in immediate and far reaching negative consequences for the juvenile justice system in Dauphin County and across the commonwealth.

This committee can help in two ways. First, assist the counties in getting this grant-in-aid of \$5.5 million released from budgetary reserve as soon as possible. Second, assist the counties in obtaining a substantial increase in this grant-in-aid similar to the 80% proposal in H.B. 24. Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak with you. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.