

An Urgent Call for Change: Advancing Justice in the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center

The 2023 Annual Report of the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center Advisory Board

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Introduction

Over the past six years, the JTDC Advisory Board has steadfastly addressed the persistent and concerning conditions within the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center (*hereinafter* “JTDC”), including the excessive use of room confinement and isolation of youth. Despite our dedicated efforts and detailed reports highlighting the significant and immediate need for change, improvements in the conditions for youth have been minimal.

The JTDC Advisory Board's 2023 annual report highlights significant ongoing and unaddressed concerns about the detention center's practices. Multiple reports issued by expert bodies and state agencies underscore the importance of reforming practices in the JTDC to prioritize rehabilitation and address the specific needs of detained youth. Unfortunately, these reports have not led to significant change at the JTDC.

This year's report, once again, focuses on the much-needed areas of improvement critical to the rehabilitation and safety of the detained youth. We, the JTDC Advisory Board, call upon Cook County Commissioners, Judges, and community leaders to join us in our ongoing mission to transform the JTDC, thereby ensuring a safer, more rehabilitative, educationally focused, and developmentally informed environment for the youth of Cook County.

Unmet Promises of Reform

JTDC Advisory Board members were hopeful that significant reforms promised by the Office of the Chief Judge (*hereinafter* “OCJ”) in 2022 would be implemented with fidelity by the JTDC leadership. After the release of the Blue Ribbon Committee Report in May 2022, an Implementation Committee was appointed by the OCJ to create a roadmap and implement necessary changes. The Implementation Committee selected [five of the numerous recommendations in that report](#) to become the focus of their efforts. The five recommendations they focused on are as follows:

1. *This oversight of the JTDC needs to be data-driven, using measures of recidivism and functional assessments of youth improvement such as*

educational achievement, stable housing, and employment. Data should be analyzed by an external organization and shared with a review board that includes families and advocates.

- 2. The JTDC Superintendent must fully report the number of hours that youth spend locked in their cells every day and work to reduce those hours.*
- 3. The JTDC Superintendent, working with mental health staff and relevant experts, must design culturally appropriate and specialized programs for females, LGBTQ+, mentally ill, substance abusers, traumatized, developmentally disabled, and transition-age youth.*
- 4. The JTDC Superintendent must evolve staff interactions with youth from being merely custodial, based on a behavior modification level system, to providing a rehabilitative response to youth.*
- 5. NBJ leadership needs to revise its assessments and curriculum to better match the needs of the youth at JTDC.*

On October 25, 2022, Chief Judge Evans issued a [press release](#) announcing additional improvements that would be implemented by the BRC Implementation Committee:

All disciplinary confinement in the youth's room will be limited to 30 minutes, followed by 30 minutes during which the youth will work with a counselor to complete a rational self-analysis of the behavior that led to the confinement. In response to the concerns expressed regarding room confinement, bedtimes have been moved back by one hour, with the earliest bedtime now at 8 pm. As soon as practicable, the bedtime of all youth will be moved back to 9:45 pm, further reducing the total time youth spend in their rooms.

Cook County Health mental health staff will partner with consultants to create culturally relevant, trauma-informed evening programming that will help youth transition to bedtime at 9:45. The programming will include simple movement and breathing techniques that can benefit even residents with short stays at the facility. Dr. Obari Cartman, president of the Chicago chapter of the Association of Black Psychologists, will lead the development of programming for boys, and Dr. Keeshawna Brooks, associate professor at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, will develop programming for girls.

Maryville Center for Children Residences has offered to house youth involved in the child welfare system who would otherwise have prolonged stays at the JTDC, as well as LGBTQ youth.

The JTDC will provide the chief judge and the Implementation Committee with a monthly report containing statistics on the number of times each confined resident was confined in his or her room, the number of minutes each resident was confined during each confinement, a description of the programs or services received, and the number of disciplinary incidents in which each resident was involved, including those not resulting in confinement.

Despite these promised reforms by the OCJ, it is not clear what, if anything, the JTDC leadership has done to implement the recommended changes. Information about the efforts toward change has rarely been shared with the JTDC Advisory Board, despite multiple requests for data and information.

Room Confinement: The JTDC Advisory Board and several other expert bodies have continued to raise concerns about excessive room confinement within the detention center. [The Blue Ribbon Committee Report](#) indicated that youth in the JTDC are held in their rooms for more than 13 hours per day, with inappropriately early bedtimes based on their age and developmental needs. Previous reporting [published in The Chicago Reporter](#) indicated that youth are routinely isolated in their rooms as a form of discipline.

At a January 2024 meeting of the JTDC Advisory Board, JTDC Assistant General Counsel Margaret A. Olesnavage stated that bedtimes have been changed for all youth in detention. Still, as of the release of this report, no confirmation of those changes has been received, despite a stated commitment to provide said confirmation to the Advisory Board.

According to [a November 2023 news article](#), a data tracking system to document the use of room confinement disciplinary actions has been created, but progress in minimizing the use of room confinement as a disciplinary tool has yet to be made. Per that article,

“...IDJJ officials found the practice of disciplinary room confinement is still widespread at the Cook County juvenile jail.

In the week before inspectors visited the JTDC in May, youths had been confined to their rooms for more than four hours 70 times, according to the report, many of those for

a full day. The previous month, there were 160 punitive room confinements, 68 of which were for more than 18 hours. There were 198 kids detained at the JTDC at the time of the inspection.”

The JTDC Advisory Board has further requested written policies and data on the use of punitive room confinement from the OCJ and JTDC leadership. As of February 2024, this data has yet to be provided.

The JTDC Advisory Board looks forward to future collaboration with the OCJ, and the leadership of the JTDC to ensure that the promised reforms come to fruition.

Concerns raised from the March 2023 Equip for Equality Report at the June 2023 Cook County Board Audit Committee Hearing

On June 28, 2023, Advisory Board members attended and testified at a hearing before the Cook County Board of Commissioners Audit Committee. The subject of the hearing was a report from Equip for Equality, the federally mandated legal advocate for people with disabilities and independent monitor of facilities, which raised serious concerns about the conditions faced by youth in the JTDC, particularly young people with disabilities (typically 30-50% of the JTDC population). The report documented violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, amongst others.

In March 2023, Equip for Equality issued a [report on the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center](#) (JTDC) which detailed several concerns regarding the use of restraints, inhumane conditions of confinement, and the lack of appropriate educational and special education services. The report, arising from extensive observation and interviews conducted by Equip for Equality, described practices such as face-down and supine physical restraints, overuse of rapid response staff, and significant lengths of time youth spent in isolation. The report emphasized the psychological impact of these practices on the already traumatized youth.

The Equip for Equality report details inhumane actions at the JTDC. It emphasizes the excessive use of physical restraints and isolation, particularly against Black teenagers with disabilities, such as mental illness and learning disabilities. The report describes these practices as dangerous, illegal, and inhumane, including incidents of severe injuries to youths. Key issues included the excessive and potentially illegal use of physical restraints on young people with disabilities, such as handcuffing a young person alone in a cell.

The report also critiques the facility's failure to provide adequate special education services and the use of a behavior modification plan that involves separation from the group population and significantly more time in a cell, leading to isolation. The report criticized the extensive use of isolation, often for minor infractions, which could exacerbate mental health issues for young people. Additionally, the facility was found to lack adequate educational services, particularly for youth with learning disabilities and mental illness. These practices were deemed inhumane and counterproductive to the JTDC's stated goals of safety and security since extended isolation neither makes a young person feel safe nor secure.

These dangerous and illegal practices were discussed at the Cook County Board Audit Committee hearing, and Equip for Equality offered comprehensive recommendations. Instead of offering solutions, JTDC officials defended (and at times denied) their use of these practices, asserting they were necessary for safety.

Recommendations raised in the Equip for Equality report included revising policies for compliance with special education requirements, creating interagency agreements for service provision, hiring additional special education teachers, and establishing quality assurance monitoring. The report also advised on reducing punitive behavior modification systems and developing trauma-informed positive behavioral interventions.

Members of the JTDC Advisory Board testified at the hearing, as did Clinton Lacey, the former Director of the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) in

Washington, D.C. In that role, Lacey was instrumental in pioneering efforts to eliminate the use of solitary confinement as a disciplinary measure for detained youth.

His approach emphasized rehabilitation over punishment, focusing on therapeutic and supportive interventions that address the underlying issues leading to problematic behavior. Lacey's commitment to reform has involved the implementation of alternative strategies to solitary confinement, including conflict resolution programs, mental health services, and educational opportunities designed to empower and rehabilitate young individuals in the detention system.

Under Clinton Lacey's leadership, the D.C. juvenile detention center saw significant shifts in its operational philosophy, moving towards a model that values the dignity and potential of every young person. Lacey's work is grounded in the belief that treating youth with compassion and respect and providing them with the tools for personal growth can lead to better outcomes for individuals and the community at large. The JTDC Advisory Board hopes that Cook County leaders heard in his testimony that these changes are both urgently needed and possible. The Advisory Board will continue to advocate for the development of parallel reforms in Cook County.

The Advisory Board requested an update on the progress made in implementing reforms since the release of the report from Equip for Equality. Equip for Equality provided the following update:

Since releasing the report on the JTDC and the CPS-run Nancy B. Jefferson School, Equip for Equality has engaged with local and state leaders about strategies for reform. Equip for Equality has spent close to 10 hours in four in-depth discussions with Chief Judge Evans. At the Chief Judge's request, Equip for Equality researched and recommended a firm to conduct multi-day de-escalation training at the JTDC that was delivered in November of 2023. Equip for Equality has met with CPS leadership about steps that were taken to address their findings. Equip for Equality is committed to further collaboration to secure systems reform in 2024.

To the knowledge of the JTDC Advisory Board, no further progress has been made in implementing these suggested changes by JTDC leadership. The JTDC Advisory Board remains committed to seeing these reforms implemented.

JTDC Advisory Board's Commitment to Improve the JTDC: A Summary of Advisory Board Meetings in 2023

In 2023, the JTDC Advisory Board held several key meetings focused on addressing vital concerns at the JTDC. The Advisory Board invited experts to its regularly scheduled meetings to learn more about and discuss various issues impacting the youth at the JTDC including pending juvenile justice legislation, mental health services, and educational services.

March 2023 Advisory Board Meeting

The March Advisory Board meeting was attended by Superintendent Leonard Dixon, and several JTDC staff members including Assistant Superintendents Diane McGee, and Rhonda Ramos, as well as Dr. Kenneth Soyemi. Additionally, the mothers of two young people who are currently detained in the JTDC as Automatic Transfers, and one young adult who was detained in the JTDC from 2010-2012 were also in attendance. Commissioner Gainer and Commissioner Degnen were also present.

During the meeting, Dr. Soyemi gave an update on COVID in the Detention Center, explaining there was a 2% positivity rate in 2023 and as of March 2023 there had been 270 positive COVID cases at the JTDC. Dr. Soyemi discussed the JTDC's goal of increasing the number of COVID vaccinations among youth, to keep the youth safe, and to allow full-time programming to resume. Unfortunately, according to Dr. Soyemi, the rate of COVID vaccinations was not where the JTDC would like it to be despite efforts to educate youth and their families about vaccine efficacy.

JTDC Advisory Board members and Commissioners Gainer and Degnen asked questions about the use of room confinement. Commissioner Degnen queried JTDC staff members as to why there had been no resolution to issues raised in the OCJ's Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) and Equip for Equality Reports, specifically related to room confinement and bedtimes. As of this March meeting, Superintendent Dixon shared that some bedtimes had been moved from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m., based on the JTDC's behavior modification system. It was not clear which pods and which behavioral level of youth received the later bedtime. Superintendent Dixon offered to connect the JTDC Advisory Board with a staff person who could assist us with the data. Superintendent Dixon also stated that he had a concern that if the Advisory Board received the data it may be used to cast a negative light on the Center. It is worth noting here that members of the JTDC Advisory Board are appointed by the Cook County Board of Commissioners to advise the County and JTDC leaders on practices to improve the JTDC and promote juvenile justice reform. To advise effectively requires collaboration and transparency. To date, no data has been shared with the Advisory Board from Superintendent Dixon or his staff person. However, Superintendent Dixon did arrange for the Advisory Board to attend a tour of the JTDC (discussed further in the report).

July 2023 Advisory Board Meeting

Jennifer Vollen-Katz, Executive Director of the John Howard Association, and Father David Kelly, Chaplain at the JTDC and Executive Director of Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, spoke at the Advisory Board's July 27th meeting.

In her presentation, Ms. Vollen-Katz explained that the John Howard Association monitors state-run facilities but at times, has been invited to detention centers. She discussed her agency's successful advocacy in passing legislation that expands the Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsman from oversight of just youth facilities under the Department of Juvenile Justice to oversight of all County juvenile detention facilities.

Ms. Vollen-Katz reported that in July of 2023, there were 150 youth in custody in the state of Illinois, and 400-500 youth in the detention centers daily. Youth held in detention centers have no access to a trusted adult like the Ombudsman with whom to share concerns and complaints confidentially. According to Ms. Vollen-Katz, the John Howard Association has found the Ombudsman position to be very useful with youth in the custody of the Department of Juvenile Justice and has seen a decrease in complaints and concerns from youth in DJJ facilities.

In July 2023, legislation was signed into law by Governor JB Pritzker, broadening the scope of authority for the Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsman. Beginning in 2025, this legislation will extend the office of the Ombudsman to juvenile detention centers in Illinois.

Also at the July 2023 meeting, Father David Kelly, Executive Director of Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, gave a presentation to the Advisory Board, unveiling his proposal to launch a pilot program that embeds restorative justice practices within the JTDC. Accompanied by two youths who had previously been detained at the JTDC, and PBMR staff member Joe Montgomery, Father Kelly explained the benefits of integrating restorative justice circles and other restorative practices into the Detention Center's behavioral program.

Father Kelly's proposed pilot program aims to operationalize two specialized pods: one designated for youths charged as adults (i.e. automatic transfer cases/ "AT" pod) and another pod in the JTDC, both staffed by individuals specifically trained in and committed to restorative justice principles. This strategy emphasizes the importance of incorporating restorative practices from the very inception of behavior management protocols, rather than as a reactionary measure to confinement or punishment.

Underlining the need for restorative practices, the youth presenting with Father Kelly stated that staff sometimes contribute to violence by residents, explaining that staff from certain neighborhoods often take sides in conflict and increase the negativity felt between young people.

The initiative received support from Commissioner Gainer and Assistant Superintendent McGee, who both acknowledged the transformative potential of integrating restorative justice practices into the JTDC's operational framework in the meeting.

Update, 2024: As of January 2024, Father David Kelly reported leading a four-day restorative justice training for JTDC staff has taken place but the larger pilot program proposed by Father David Kelly has not yet been implemented.

September 28, 2023 Advisory Board Meeting

The Advisory Board invited Karima Douglas, Independent Juvenile Ombudsman, to speak at the September meeting. The [Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsman](#) (OIJO) is an independent office co-aligned with the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), created by Senate Bill 2352 (Public Act 98-1032) in 2014. The Ombudsman's role is to ensure that the rights of youth committed to the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice are fully observed, and to assist in pursuing services for committed youth and their families determined to need assistance. (730 ILCS 5/3-2.7-1, et seq.)

Ms. Douglas reported that the Office aims to be a consistent presence to address the immediate concerns of the incarcerated youth. The Ombudsman's Office visits all five facilities at least twice per month and can be reached by youth on a free confidential phone line at any time as well. They receive various questions from youth and do their best to find the answers by dialoguing frequently with IDJJ administrators and executive team members.

As mentioned above, in July 2023, legislation was enacted by Governor JB Pritzker, broadening the scope of authority for the Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsman. Previously limited to supervising the five Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice facilities in Illinois, the Ombudsman's mandate will extend to encompass county-operated juvenile detention centers across Illinois. This role involves addressing complaints from young people who are detained and serving as a support resource for

both the detained or incarcerated youths and their families. The new statute is scheduled to take effect in January 2025.

Ms. Douglas reported that the Office is using the year 2024 to build its capacity to serve detention centers in the same way they have served statewide youth prisons. Since detention centers across Illinois lack uniform policies, Ms. Douglas reported that the office will begin by addressing state-established laws and guidelines.

According to Ms. Douglas, superintendents across detention centers in Illinois have expressed negative views about this initiative. Some fear it will interfere with their operations, and that the ability for the youth to call the office of the Ombudsman can harm the overall functioning of the detention center. According to Ms. Douglas, many leaders of detention centers feel that they are doing their jobs well and therefore, do not require additional oversight.

The January 1, 2024 closure of the Franklin County Detention Center for egregious conditions belies the notion that detention centers can monitor themselves. At Franklin County Detention Center, youth were locked in their cells 20 to 24 hours a day, multiple days in a row with no mental health professionals available to address trauma experienced by detained youth. Already facing a lawsuit by the ACLU, the center was permanently closed by the Chief Judge of that Circuit in the winter of 2023. Youths were transferred to downstate facilities in Madison and St. Clair County, and one young person was possibly sent to a facility in Indiana.

Ms. Douglas explained to the Advisory Board that unlike the auditors who generally only speak to a handful of youth, the Ombudsman's office will be directly accessible to all the youth regularly. Frequently, youth who meet with auditors are not self-selected and oftentimes hesitant to speak out of fear of retaliation. Therefore the expanded purview of the Illinois Juvenile Ombudsman will be an important advancement in accountability for treatment and care of youth in custody in Illinois.

November 30, 2023 Advisory Board Meeting

The November Advisory Board meeting was a working meeting to outline the 2023 annual report, recruit new members, and follow up on the lack of data provided by the OCJ and JTDC leadership on the implementation of promised reforms.

The Board welcomed Stephanie Hall, the Deputy Chief Financial Officer from the Office of the Chief to serve as the Board's liaison with the OCJ. The Board looks forward to continued collaboration with Ms. Hall and her team and appreciates her efforts to expand communication between the OCJ and the Advisory Board.

Karima Douglas of the Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsman (OIJO) also attended the meeting. The Advisory Board welcomes these additional voices and viewpoints to the Board's meetings. The Board believes that part of our mission is to support and amplify the voices and resources of community organizations and other state and county leaders who can offer additional aid to the youth detained at the JTDC.

Advisory Board Members Report on September 2023 Tour of the JTDC and Meeting With JTDC Staff

On September 26, 2023, four members of the JTDC Advisory Board attended a three-hour meeting with JTDC staff and a tour of the Juvenile Detention Center: Chair Meade Palidofsky, Secretary Briana Payton, and members Marjorie B. Moss and Dr. DaKeda Horton.

During the tour of the JTDC the Mental Health Department provided a comprehensive update on their services:

The mental health department reported that they have improved its staffing levels and are currently short two staff members.

Service Provision: Mental health staff report that they conduct screenings for new intakes within 72 hours. These screenings encompass areas such as trauma, drug use, and alcohol consumption.

Programming: The department reported that they now conduct approximately one group session per week in each pod. The content of these sessions focuses on emotional intelligence, substance abuse, risk reduction, and trauma, adhering to the SPARCS (Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress.) Curriculum. Additionally, in the reset pod, staff utilize the Power Source curriculum which emphasizes the development of social skills.

The mental health department reported that a collaboration has been established between JTDC and Maryville Academy. This partnership aims to engage Maryville Academy staff in leading therapeutic groups focused on substance abuse at the JTDC.

Designated Therapy Area: According to the mental health team, one room in each pod has been converted into a therapy room. The objective is to make these spaces less cell-like, more comfortable, and conducive to private sessions.

Continuity of Care: According to the Mental Health team, the Juvenile Justice Care Coordination program allows mental health staff to maintain continuity of care by following up with youth in the community for up to 90 days post-detention. Although it is now operational, it is not yet fully staffed. Uniquely, this program is accessible to youth both inside and outside of detention.

JTDC Board members gained detailed information about the RESET POD from JTDC staff including caseworkers assigned to the RESET POD. That report is detailed below:

- The Reset Pod is designated for youths who have committed serious infractions, such as assaulting staff.

- The typical duration of stay in this program averages around 10 days and is dependent on the youth getting through the behavior modification materials.
- Youth receive the Power Source book, a behavioral modification book, and progress through it at their own pace. Staff informed Advisory board members that some youth get through the assignments quickly and therefore have a shorter stay in the RESET pod.
- JTDC youth “attend” school by receiving worksheets and getting guidance from a teacher who is assigned to the RESET pod when needed. It did not appear that there were any accommodations made for students with special education needs nor were lessons being taught when JTDC Board members were present.
- In cases where the youth is not deemed ready to reintegrate into the general population, he or she then transfers to the “recovery pod,” where they receive additional attention and help with behavior modification tools. Advisory Board members did not see this pod.

There is currently no formal evaluation process in place for youths to provide feedback on the RESET program. Such feedback would help determine if the program has any positive impact or helps improve behavior.

The Use of Jumpsuits

Advisory Board members were alarmed by the bright canary yellow jumpsuits worn by the youth on the RESET pod. The choice of yellow jumpsuits raises significant concerns about the messages being conveyed to the children in custody. Historically, jumpsuits have been synonymous with criminalization and institutionalization, a symbolism that is particularly impactful in the context of juvenile justice. This is especially relevant considering the JTDC's past use of prison jumpsuits, which was among the practices that were discontinued following a federal lawsuit filed in 1999 by the ACLU. The reintroduction of such garments could send developmentally inappropriate messages to

the youth. These messages might reinforce a criminal identity, contrary to the rehabilitative and supportive ethos that juvenile justice systems should strive to embody. It is crucial to ensure that the physical environment and attire in these settings do not undermine the self-perception and growth of young people who are in a critical stage of their personal development. The staff's explanation that the use of yellow jumpsuits in the pod is based solely on practical considerations, as they are the only available suits without pockets, merits further examination in light of the broader implications of such attire in a juvenile justice setting.

Ongoing Challenges in Transparency, Communication, and Collaboration

Despite the Advisory Board's many attempts to engage with the OCJ and Superintendent Dixon about the alarming issues raised in the reports from Equip for Equality and several other monitoring bodies, the Board has received no further communication from the OCJ about efforts to address these concerns. We have noted a persistent lack of transparency and data sharing from JTDC leadership. Despite multiple requests, the Board faced difficulties in obtaining necessary information and data, including basic policies that should be well documented and easy to share. This lack of collaboration has impeded the Board's ability to effectively advise on and address challenges within the detention center, highlighting the need for improved communication and transparency from the JTDC leadership.

An [article published by the Better Government Association](#) on April 17, 2023, addresses a loophole in Illinois' Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) that affects juvenile justice settings and illustrates this challenge in Cook County. This lack of transparency hampers efforts to address potential abuse and misconduct in these facilities. Among other issues, this loophole allows juvenile detention centers to withhold information about the use of room confinement and its impact on detained young people. The article suggests that including the Judicial Branch under Illinois' FOIA and standardizing

definitions for confinement practices across detention centers could help improve oversight and conditions for detained and incarcerated youth.

Detention centers, especially those housing youth, bear a heightened responsibility for transparency and accountability. This is vital not only for the safeguarding of the rights and welfare of detained youth but also for maintaining community trust in the juvenile justice system.

The absence of transparency can lead to unchecked practices that may harm the physical and mental well-being of young people in detention. Moreover, when detention centers operate in shadows, the risk of human rights violations escalates, and opportunities for necessary reform are obscured. Our call for openness and accountability from JTDC leadership amplifies the need to protect the most vulnerable and to uphold the values of justice and human rights that are the cornerstone of a democratic society. The lack of transparency on the part of the OCJ and JTDC presents a threat to the safety of youth in detention and conflicts with the principles of a democratic society. Therefore, the JTDC Advisory Board will continue to call for accountability and information sharing about the conditions and treatment of youth in detention with the public.

Audit Findings and Blue Ribbon Committee Follow-Up

The November 2023 Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice's audit revealed significant violations at the Cook County JTDC. Findings included [inappropriate strip searches](#) of youth as young as 13, and excessive use of room confinement for discipline.

During their inspection of the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center in May 2023, officials from the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice observed that the use of disciplinary room confinement remained prevalent. The week before their visit, detained youth had been subjected to over four hours of room confinement on 70 occasions, with several instances extending to an entire day. In the preceding month, the facility

recorded 160 instances of punitive room confinement, 68 of which lasted longer than 18 hours. At the time of this evaluation, the JTDC was housing 198 youths.

These practices violate state standards and raise serious concerns about the treatment and well-being of youth in custody. The audit, a crucial tool for monitoring compliance, highlighted the need for urgent reforms to ensure humane treatment in juvenile detention facilities.

It is worth noting that a report by the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC) from [December 19, 2023](#), achieved satisfactory compliance with the AOIC Juvenile Detention Standards. While we applaud any improvements in the JTDC, this is unfortunately not an indication that the abusive practices documented in the IDJJ audit or the other reports mentioned above have been addressed. The AOIC addresses different standards and practices than those monitored by the IDJJ audit, Equip for Equality, or those that were reported on by the Blue Ribbon Committee. As a result, there is still no evidence that those harmful practices have been addressed.

Requests regarding implementation of the recommendations of the Implementation Committee and their status in 2024

In April 2021, Chief Judge Timothy Evans formed a Blue Ribbon Committee in response to the [JTDC Advisory Board Annual Report](#), advocating for an end to punitive room confinement. This initiative followed a [2018 Chicago Reporter article](#) highlighting increased room confinement despite a declining detention population, and recommendations from the Center for Children’s Law and Policy to reduce such practices.

The Committee, led by noted child psychologist Dr. Eugene Griffin, concluded that JTDC's methods were more isolating than rehabilitative, with young people (who are primarily Black) spending over 13 hours daily confined in their cells. The report urged substantial reforms toward a rehabilitative focus. In a letter to Judge Evans in May of 2022, Dr. Griffin called for JTDC Supt. Leonard Dixon’s firing, saying he should be

replaced with someone “committed to transforming the JTDC from simply housing youth within its charge to safely developing youth competency.”

Subsequently, a Chief Judge's Office issued a [press release](#) that announced plans to phase out room confinement and the engagement of Chapin Hall for a 90-day reform plan.

After repeated requests for data and information were unmet, the JTDC Advisory Board received this update at its January 25, 2024 meeting from Margaret Olesnavage, Assistant General Counsel to the Juvenile Detention Center.

According to Ms. Olesnavage’s statements in the meeting, JTDC leadership met with Bryan Samuels, Executive Director of Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Based on that meeting, she said, the Chief Judge’s directive has been reviewed. Ms. Olesnavage reported that the Chief Judge and the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC) now endorse the JTDC’s Behavior Modification program with staggered bedtimes. It is unclear from these statements whether this means that bedtimes have already been revised, or if there is some intention to revise bedtimes in the future.

Although we have asked for this clarification, as of February 2024, the Advisory Board’s repeated requests for the new written policies and for data to support the implementation of these changes have received no response.

Board Recruitment

The JTDC Advisory Board will replace four positions in 2024, notably our Secretary, mental health expert, and co-chair, who are leaving the Board after fulfilling their terms. Our goal is to fill these positions by April 2024.

We thank Briana Payton, Dr. DaKeda Horton, Darius Ballinger, and Garien Gatewood for their commitment to juvenile justice system transformation and their invaluable service to the JTDC Advisory Board. Their diverse expertise—from Briana Payton's precision as Board Secretary, Darius Ballinger's insight on youth involvement with the criminal legal system, Dr. DaKeda Horton's mental health acumen, to Garien Gatewood's leadership as co-chair—has significantly contributed to our mission of reforming juvenile justice practices in Cook County. As they move on to embrace new professional opportunities, we recognize their dedication and tireless work that has left an indelible mark on our Advisory Board and the lives of those we serve. Their efforts towards advocating for change, fostering restorative practices, and prioritizing the mental health of our youth have been pivotal in our ongoing journey towards a more equitable and humane juvenile justice system. We wish our colleagues the very best in their future endeavors and hope their paths will cross again with the JTDC Advisory Board's mission in transformative and impactful ways.

Looking Ahead: Priorities and Goals for 2024

In closing our 2023 report, the JTDC Advisory Board affirms its commitment to supporting meaningful transformations within the Cook County juvenile justice system. Our Board's work in 2023 spotlights the pressing need for systemic reforms, emphasizing rehabilitation, mental health support, and reducing Cook County's reliance on confinement practices. Noteworthy initiatives, such as the proposed restorative justice pilot program by Father David Kelly, underscore our collective pursuit of innovative solutions that prioritize the well-being and developmental needs of detained youth.

Looking ahead, we are poised to continue advocating for the implementation of recommendations from the Equip for Equality report and the Blue Ribbon Committee, with an unwavering focus on transparency, accountability, and the pursuit of best practices that align with the developmental needs of all detained youth. The upcoming extension of the Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsman's authority into juvenile

detention centers marks a significant step towards ensuring oversight and support for our young people and their families.

As we bid farewell to dedicated board members moving on to new opportunities, we also embrace the journey ahead with renewed determination. Our goals for 2024 are ambitious yet essential: to dramatically reduce the use of confinement, strengthen community connections to offer alternatives to detention, and ensure specialized care for all youth, including those identifying as LGBTQ+ and those with disabilities. The JTDC Advisory Board remains steadfast in its vision of a rehabilitative, transparent, and just juvenile justice system that nurtures the potential of every young person in its care.