

April 18, 2023

**Bryanna Hood's Testimony for the House Children and Youth Committee Hearing on
Overcrowding in Detention Facilities**

Dear Children and Youth Committee Members,

My name is Bree. I'm 25 years old. My pronouns are they/them. I have been a part of Juvenile Law Center for almost seven years. I was 17 when I first entered the juvenile justice system. I was in two juvenile facilities total, and in both facilities I've experienced both abuse and neglect. A lot of the female youths have experienced physical and sexual abuse often by men, and when they are locked up they experience physical contact, restraints, strip searches, and other interactions with men that are unsafe, and harmful. I don't understand why men would even be allowed in female units? Regardless of knowing how harmful this is, facilities continue to allow men to continuously engage with teen girls in harmful ways. There are some cases in our state of girls and boys experiencing both sexual and physical abuse in facilities. This should never be acceptable and should not have to continue for so long before anyone steps in to help or remove children.

I wrote about my experience in Broken Bridges along with my recommendation that no male staff be allowed on any female units. This is not about short staffing, it's about valuing the experiences of girls, and protecting them. In 2018, my peers and I along with Juvenile Law Center staff wrote a publication called Broken Bridges as a way for our stories to be heard and our recommendations to be put out there about the harms we were facing in placements. We have different categories in the report about our experiences we had related to: Lack of Education, Strip Searches, Abuse, Physical Restraints, Our Separation From Family, and Isolation. In the report, one of my peers recalls his experience with strip searches and abuse,

stating, “When I first entered the placement facility, I refused to be strip searched...They pulled me into another room with five or six guards, and a few of them held me while one guard forcibly searched me.”(insert page number). He goes on to share that two guards held him and punched him and then sent him back to class. Our experiences are not one-off events, one national survey identified approximately 13,000 allegations of abuse over a three year period in juvenile facilities around the country.¹ The abuses that my and my peers shared, are similar to so many youth. If these things happened while we were at home with a parent, we would have been removed and our parents rights terminated- so why are children and youth in institutional placements seen as expendable? Why aren't we removed, and our lives protected- we were children, and teens?

Pennsylvania has an opportunity to right its wrongs. We cannot only hold children accountable for their mistakes while adults are not. Holding a child accountable is not allowing them to die, face abuse, sleep on floors, lose their education, be placed in isolation, strip searched, sexually assaulted, or forced medication that makes them sick- these are real life examples of what children and teens experience in Pennsylvania facilities. Rehabilitating children and youth, is providing care and teaching us ways to better display our anger, or funding our schools so we have more books and counselors, than police, and metal detectors, it's making sure we have a bed at night, and are cared for.

Right now there is pending legislation for a statewide ombudsman office to review cases like mine and my peers, and to prevent child abuses from happening in our state's facilities for children. We should invest in the Office of the Child Advocate, and programs, and services, that also address things for teens who have minor cases, so they can be discharged as one way to help with the overcrowding in facilities. Some youth are in these facilities when they could be

¹ https://jlc.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2018-12/2018BrokenBridges-FINAL-WEB_0.pdf, Page 15.

discharged or provided a step down to a foster home, group home, or SIL instead of remaining in an overcrowded child prison. I hope that the state of Pennsylvania can find a way to stop the overcrowding, and abuses because we're putting youth in harmful situations where they are fighting for their lives.

Thank you.