

Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsperson



Fiscal Year 2025

Annual Report

Cognitive Dissonance

Every year we approach this report thinking about a theme that resonates with the work we did. A concept, quote or phrase that captures what we saw, heard or experienced. For FY25, that concept is cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the experience of uncomfortable inconsistency between what people believe and how they behave. An uneasiness when you see an internal world misaligned with external behavior.

The Ombudsperson's Office has been embedded in the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice since 2015. During this time, we've developed trusting relationships and pathways for communication with not only young people but their families, executive leadership, external stakeholders and front-line staff. These relationships give us meaningful insight into staff decisions and the values and motivations behind those decisions. Department and detention center staff aren't cogs in a machine but have deeply rooted beliefs in the work they do each day. We see many hardworking staff who care deeply for our young people. Those who have devoted their careers to seeing young people leave their care better than they came in. We see their long hours, their battle scars, their lapsed vacation days, their cottage birthday celebrations, and tearful youth sendoffs. We see the donated bookbags, and hours long de-escalation conversations. We see them show up.

But we also see the inconsistency between their intentions, *these promises* and the behaviors that followed. We notice the distance between what staff say and what they do. What policy demands and how policy is interpreted. Too many want credit for their progressive ideas, the research citing best practices, new programs, and reforms. But reality falls short. The reality is understaffing, inadequate funding, labor grievances, malevolence, ego, inexperienced leadership and unanswered emails. The dissonance lies in craving praise for effort without proving effectiveness. The dissonance is in expecting accountability and discipline from struggling teenagers but resisting those same things when confronted by this Office. Next year we hope to see fewer promises in exchange for more impact. We hope to see more transparency and communication between staff and youth, their families and the community so that they can all see what we see. Less dissonance – more alignment.

Here is the annual report submitted by the Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsperson to the Honorable JB Pritzker, Governor of the State of Illinois and the Illinois General Assembly summarizing the activities done in furtherance of the purpose of the Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsperson (OIJO or Office) pursuant to 730 ILCS 5/3-2.7-35. This report covers state fiscal year 2054 (July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025) the period hereafter known as FY25.

This report reflects aggregated and disaggregated data organized across facilities. It also describes the work of the Ombudsperson, issues and complaints undertaken by this Office without confidential identifying information, and recommendations.

What's New in FY25

Meet the Team!

The Office of the Independent Juvenile Ombudsperson has proudly grown three-fold this year! So, let's introduce the crew:

- **Karima Douglas- Ombudsperson.** Karima joined the Office in August 2017 as Deputy. She transitioned to the Ombudsperson role in July 2021. Karima is based in Chicago; the city she has made her home since attending Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law. She graduated and joined the Illinois Bar in 2012. Northwestern is where she developed her passion for public service and honed her juvenile justice advocacy skills in the Bluhm Legal Clinic's Children and Family Justice Center. Karima was born and raised in Miami, Florida, where she learned a healthy appreciation for sunshine and the change of seasons.
- **Samuel London- Director of Youth Outreach.** Samuel joined the Office mid-October of 2024 after from serving as the Assistant Superintendent of Operations at IYC Pere Marquette. Samuel is based in southern Illinois, Belleville to be exact. Samuel is from Madison, IL, a small poverty-stricken town right outside of St. Louis, MO, born and raised. Samuel's upbringing and all the help he's had along his life's journey built his passion to return the favor to young people fighting similar circumstances. As of December 2025, Samuel has been an employee of the state of Illinois for 12 years. Samuel also has been a high school basketball coach for the past 6 years. When he's not coaching high school basketball you can find him acting as a volunteer flag football, youth baseball and youth basketball coach.
- **Adriana Obispo- Administrative Assistant.** Adriana joined the Office at the beginning of January 2025. She is a born and raised Chicagoan and an eight-year veteran of the United States Air Force and Illinois Air Guard. She holds a bachelor's degree in criminology from Southern New Hampshire University and is based in the best city in the world: Chicago. Adriana is deeply committed to supporting underserved communities and believes that investing in youth is essential to build stronger futures.

Welcome County-Operated Juvenile Detention!

Building out our small but mighty team could not have come at a better time. In July 2023, the Illinois General Assembly passed Public Act 103-0397 expanding the Office's jurisdiction from five state-operated IDJJ Illinois Youth Centers to also include 15 county-operated juvenile detention centers. The youth in these detention centers are now (and really have always been) **our** youth. Our amended statute, with this expanded jurisdiction, is a natural extension of our mandate to advocate for youth navigating the complicated waters of the

Illinois juvenile justice system. Now while this expansion is necessary and welcome, it does it does come with challenges. The law went into effect January 1, 2025, halfway through this fiscal year. During that time, with limited staff capacity, we were able to complete introductory visits to 8 of the 15 facilities. Thank you to those detention centers, the AOIC's Mark Bronke and Dan Hunt, and IDJJ's John Albright, for so warmly and patiently welcoming us to this work. We look forward to growing our team more in FY26 to immerse ourselves in these detention centers, build trust with youth and staff in these communities, and expand our ability to respond to their needs in real time.

What Stayed the Same

IDJJ Wrapped - Top 10 Department Wide Issues

With over 70 visits to IDJJ facilities this year, we saw recurring issues unique to individual youth and frequent callers. We referred hundreds of issues unique to specific facilities perhaps reflecting flaws in facility culture and leadership. This year we want to highlight the 10 systemic issues that routinely rose to the top across the state:

- **Safety- Peer to Peer and Staff to Youth**
 - Youth shouldn't be expected to work through rehabilitation services and achieve success in learning new life skills if they don't feel safe. Month after month we heard complaints from youth about their safety. Youth self-confined to their rooms, refused school, and begged for transfers to new units or new facilities because they feared the youth around them. Youth complained that when they're bullied, they are forced between a rock and a hard place because if they defend themselves, they risk punishment but if they don't, they are marked as a target for assaults or extortion. Transfer requests are met with more no's than yes's and there are too few options among units or facilities to really offer a true respite once reputations are established.
 - That catch-22 is also true for violence that occurs between staff and youth. Youth who complained of staff harassment or excessive force may get some temporary separation from problematic staff but often, investigations into staff misbehavior end with a cursory "unsubstantiated" finding. Youth may call our Office to keep those separations intact, but these are requests, not entitlements.
- **Contraband Response**
 - This year there was a noticeable shift across the agency regarding contraband. Youth were found with and caught under the influence of drugs and the agency responded with new, strict measures. Those measures included ramped up

technological and physical surveillance as well as the installation of full body scanners for youth and visitors. Youth complained that the mistakes of the few meant harsh punishment and restriction for all. While last year, DJJ increased access to visits with fictive kin and extended family, this year showed how easily that access can be pulled back.

- **Property**

- With the constant stream of unit and facility transfer requests, came an almost constant stream of complaints from youth about their property being lost, stolen or unjustifiably seized without hope of return. There is no clear infrastructure in place to restore youth who have had their items improperly seized during searches and then lost. This is especially rampant when youth transfer between facilities and their property is either inadequately stored or improperly packed and transported. The same inadequate infrastructure rings true when peers steal from one another without immediate staff intervention. This Office worked overtime strongly encouraging Department and facility leadership to take responsibility for the tracking, protection and storage of youth property. Many of these youth and their loved ones don't have much so they shouldn't have to worry that what little they do have can disappear in DJJ custody without recourse.

- **Point/Behavior Level Disputes**

- The behavior level system drives so much of the Department. It determines bedtime, visit lists, commissary, access to field trips and special programming. With all that comes attached to behavior level, staff discretion controls "points" for youth. So, complaints to our Office contesting points and behavior levels too often stems from chronic antagonism and mistrust between staff and youth.

- **Sentence Adjustments**

- This year brought many more questions and promptings from youth across the agency regarding their "good time" credits. This is especially true for youth with adult sentences. For them, good time credits are only accessed through programs, behavior contracts or Director driven "earned discretionary sentence credit." Youth complained and we agreed that staff deprioritized submitting and applying sentence adjustments. Any person waiting on their freedom sees every day in custody as urgent, but staff don't match that energy in their workloads or in their communication.

- **Communication**

- This brings us to a leading issue from last year's report. Youth use our Office just to communicate with Department decision makers. We aim to be the last stop for youth and families who just can't seem to get a response otherwise.

Youth were more aware than ever about their rights but when they spoke up with asks about issues like: locating their missing property, submissions of sentence credits, resolutions of point disputes or release decisions, they were ignored, dismissed or told to wait indefinitely. Sometimes they were casually advised to call us.

- **School Attendance Disruptions**

- For four of the five IDJJ facilities, school is a year-round entitlement. However, this year youth complained that for some reason or another they were held back from school, denied school, or noticed a pattern of only partial school attendance for weeks. Some youth were chronically held back from school due to previous behavior disruptions or concerns of future disruptions. Youth were held back from school when the principal or teachers decided those youth weren't "ready" to attend or needed further counseling about their behavior before they could return. Youth were held back from school or attended for only a few class periods a day because of low security staffing numbers or when security staff were pulled to respond to other behavior incidents. Every time this happens, students get further and further away from their education goals. Collateral consequences to repeatedly missing school meant missed sentence reduction goals and most crushing for some, missed precious opportunities to leave the unit for fresh air and socialization.

- **Delayed PRB Release Decisions**

- Youth complained and we noticed a trend of increasingly long delays of receiving final release decisions from the parole board after revocation hearings. What typically took a few days to receive signed decisions, sometimes took one to two weeks this year. Release from custody is the single most important issue for many young people in IDJJ. So, these delays cause real harm. Youth waiting for these decisions were anxious, frustrated and scared. They directed that energy, those questions and sometimes accusations at DJJ staff and occasionally this Office but the timeliness of these communications were outside of our control.

- **Grooming and Hygiene**

- Haircuts, body wash and laundry. Youth at IYCs PEACE Center, Warrenville and Harrisburg complained throughout the year of going months without haircuts. Even though the northern region has a contracted barber, his services were inconsistent, at best. IYC Harrisburg has no such contract and came to rely on help from student barbers over the years. This brings inconsistency month to month even with our Office's advocacy. Pere Marquette has a contracted barber shared with IDOC who visits regularly but most youth there complained about uneven cuts, nicks and scars leaving them without good options.

- Another chronic complaint at all the facilities is about body wash. The Department-supplied body wash is only a step above hand soap. Body washes that youth actually want to shower with, that don't hurt or strip their skin or just the smell good soap that remind them of home is hard to find. Youth couldn't buy it through state commissary, and it was often out of stock in facility "coupon" stores. In other environments, we would want to encourage teenagers to develop good shower habits, the Department didn't do much to help them.
- Finally, a relatively new pattern seemed to emerge this year of complaints from young people about laundry services. Washers and dryers were in chronic disrepair and slow to be replaced or serviced. This year also brought out complaints about staff rationing laundry detergent to essentially a half cup per youth per week. Youth have very few state-issued clothing items, so they need to wash their clothes more often. Residents complained to us that restricting their access to laundry detergent either forced them to re-wear dirty clothes or wash their clothes with their limited body wash.

- **Room Confinement**

- We heard countless complaints from youth this year about unfair room confinement. Here are a few of the reasons staff confined youth to their rooms: after a fight, arguments between youth, arguments between staff and youth, youth refusing to hand over a remote, "verbal aggression," youth looking aggressive, youth asking too many questions, staff needing to do paperwork, an incident on another unit, or staff just having a bad day. When a youth is placed in their room for a behavioral hold, far too often they were held too long without specific reason. The corresponding paperwork almost always used the same buzz words as reason to keep the youth in their rooms i.e. pacing with their fists balled, yelling, making threats, banging on the walls, "I asked the youth if they were ok, and they told me to shut up." While the paperwork says one thing, our office will receive calls from youth witnesses in real time describing a calm youth in their room just begging to come out.
- The second most common reason for room confinement after behavior holds, were "administrative holds." Administrative holds were essentially any confinement holds deemed justified by administrative staff. Specifically, most of the complaints about these kinds of holds came from youth at IYC Warrenville. There, the youth would spend multiple days a week in their rooms due to low staffing numbers. This Office understands the hiring challenges across the state. We also note here that DJJ took a big step to improve recruitment by dropping the bachelor's degree requirement for incoming security staff. However, despite the improvements in recruitment and hiring, there were noticeable struggles in retention, staff injuries and last-minute call outs. Room confinement remained the most harmful consequence of those struggles.

Detention Spotlights

We visited eight county-operated detention centers this year [Peoria, Sangamon (twice), Cook, Winnebago, Adams, Madison, St. Clair, Kane, Knox and McLean]. The focus of these initial visits was to introduce our Office to the young people and staff in these facilities who may have seen our names on flyers but didn't fully understand what we were about on the other side of the phone line. Even though we made our first introductions to dozens of young people, we recognized handfuls of young people in each county from their previous commitments in IDJJ.

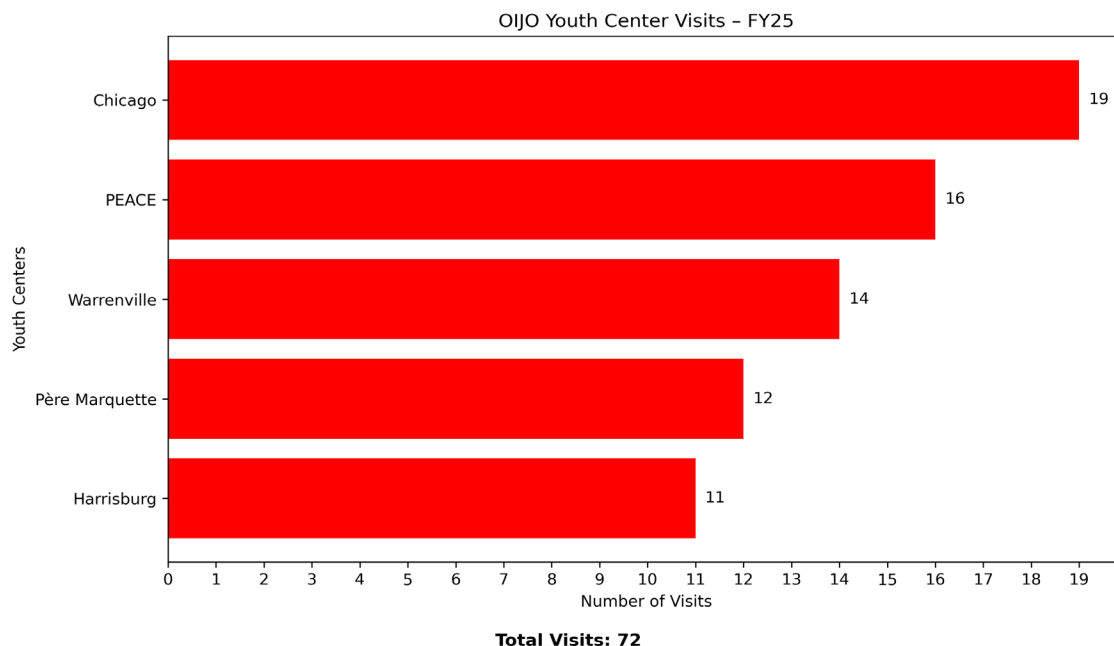
There are four issues that trended across all nine visits:

- **Room Confinement:** young people complained that they spent too much time in their rooms. Even though most administrations expressed optimism around staff recruitment, understaffing and staff injuries did impact staff numbers enough to lead to room holds. The stated justifications for these holds were youth and staff safety in the event of an emergency and to meet PREA safety ratios. Youth complained that these holds weren't always justified but staff just wanted to punish them or couldn't be bothered dealing with them.
- **Length of stay:** county-operated detention centers are meant to be temporary spaces for young people waiting for disposition in court or navigating probation violations. At each of the facilities we visited we noted young people with longer stays in detention (3 months or more) struggled more with the limitations of their environments. Inconsistent communication with attorneys, limited access to post-graduate programs, infrequent updates re: pending charges, and restrictive phone policies while tolerable for youth admitted for a few days, they feel punishing to young people sitting in limbo for months at a time.
- **Property:** regardless of geography or resources, the detention centers were noticeably more restrictive than IDJJ on what items young people could call their own. We noticed how little occupied rooms looked *occupied*. If youth were given snacks, they couldn't store them, they had to eat them right away. All laundry was collected at the end of each day or second day to return to the community pile. It's hard not to empathize with a teenager wanting to control their own underwear or wanting to save their favorite brownie for a late-night snack. Being in custody without a clear release date is hard enough but it's made that much harder when you can't freely decorate your room with pictures from home or squeeze out your own toothpaste.
- **Food:** at every county-operated facility that used outside contracts for the meals including from the adult county jails, youth complained that the food was abysmal. Not only do the food choices seem poor, but the facility's execution of ISBE dietary standards left youth hungry. The vendors don't provide extra food for seconds, so

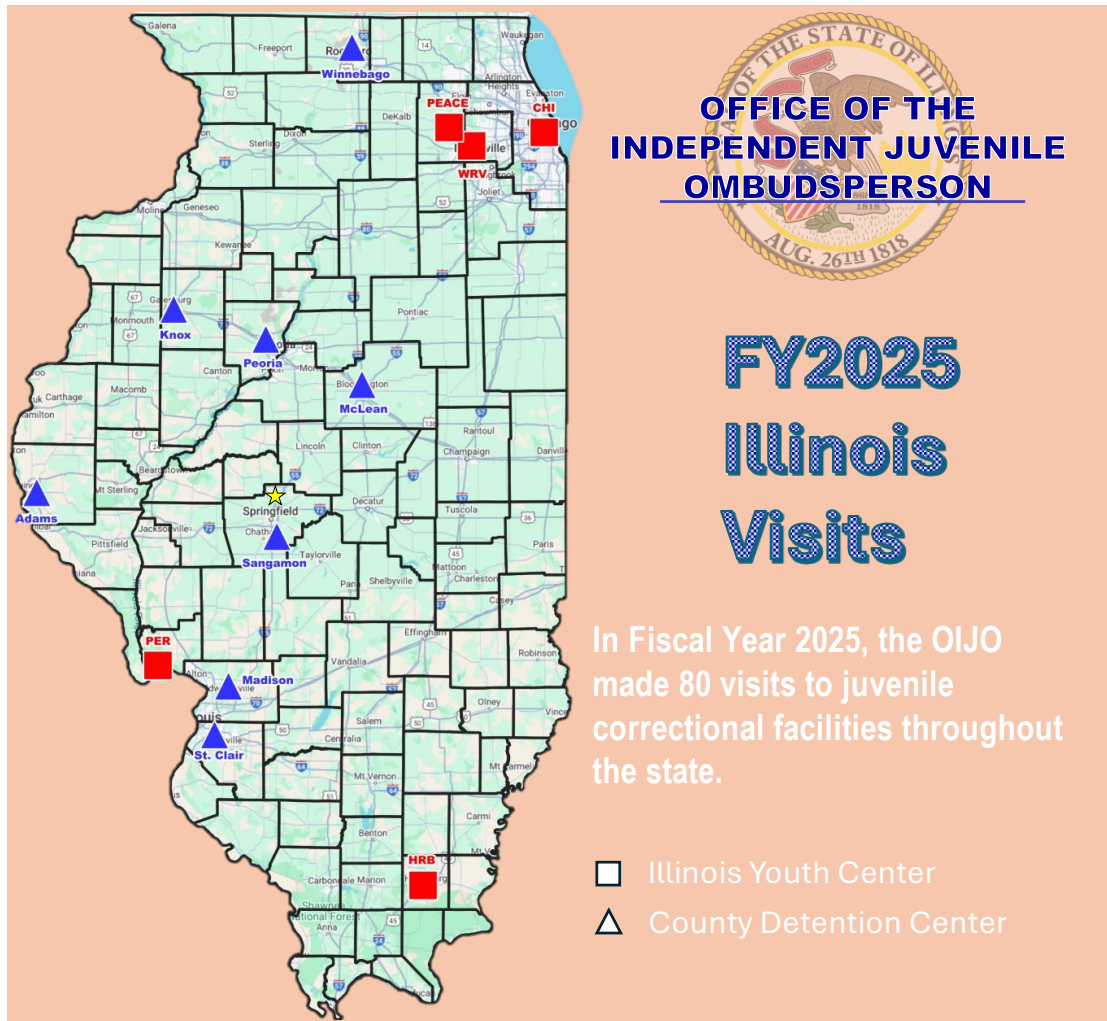
far too often the young people are forced to go hungry or hope that the facility provided snack would suffice for the evening.

Youth Engagement Overview

One of the critical ways we build and maintain relationships with the youth we serve is by staying in touch by phone. Over the course of FY2025, we received over 900 calls from young people from all five Illinois Youth Centers as well as aftercare and county-operated juvenile detention centers. Youth in DJJ custody and on aftercare, their family members and others calling on their behalf could reach the OIJO by telephone daily. All to this Office remain free, unmonitored, and unrecorded to preserve confidentiality. Youth in the DJJ facilities have access to Securus operated phones in common areas of each of their living units. The youth calling from the detention centers have Ameelio serviced tablets or utilize land lines in private to reach out. Youth may call to initiate complaints, to ask questions about navigating their respective systems, to confirm answers they have received from staff, to vent about bad days or to share good news. In order to limit duplicate statistics, our Office focuses our records on issues formally and informally referred, youth inquiries and formal complaint memos to the Department.



The OIJO conducted in-person visits to each of the DJJ Illinois Youth Centers (IYCs) a total of 72 times. Chicago: 19; IYC Harrisburg: 11; IYC Pere Marquette: 12; IYC St. Charles/PEACE Center: 16; IYC Warrenville:



We made in-person visits to each of the DJJ Illinois Youth Centers (IYCs) a total of 72 times. To IYC Chicago: 19; IYC Harrisburg: 11; IYC Pere Marquette: 12; IYC St. Charles/PEACE Center: 16; and IYC Warrenville: 14. We made visits to 8 of the 15 Juvenile Detention Centers. We visited Sangamon County twice, Peoria, Winnebago, Adams, Madison, Kane, Knox, and McClean. In addition to visiting young people in custody, the Director of Youth Outreach made 7 visits to residential treatment facilities where youth have gone after release from DJJ. The facilities visited were Centerstone in Carbondale: 1, One Hope United in Centralia: 3, and TCI in Cahokia Heights: 3. These visits allowed us to observe youth in community settings and gain valuable insight into how young people are served when they can't return home, need additional services before returning home or when they just need a leg-up in building a home for themselves. DJJ, especially its Aftercare/Community Services Division continued to do great work cultivating a network of stalwart providers, mentors, and volunteers. So many young people seem better for it.

When we weren't taking calls or walking through facilities, we were still working. The Director of Youth Outreach visited with youth in community either on Aftercare, recently finished an Aftercare term or were released on adult parole supervision. The visits included,

but were not limited to sharing meals, discussing life plans and goals, catching up on life happenings and general fellowshiping. Mr. London participated in **125** youth adjustment committee disciplinary hearings. Our Office also kept peace circles with incoming intern classes promoting the need for our Office and the DJJ staff to have a willing, collaborative relationship, reminding them of the restorative goals of DJJ, explaining to them the history and purpose of our Office, as well as emphasizing the power they have in shaping the young people's lives.

Finally, one high note of the year for the OIJO was that our then, two-person office attended the 50th OJJDP National Conference on Youth Justice in Washington, DC. There, we were able to network, making connections with stakeholders from around the country, and participate in workshops where we heard different perspectives on the important work we do. The highlight of the conference was hearing the great Brian Stevenson give the keynote speech leaving us both rejuvenated and motivated to do more!

Complaints & Recommendations

Summary of Complaints

Complaints are the formal written memos from the Ombudsperson's Office to the IDJJ Director and Executive Staff regarding serious issues that were ongoing and could not be resolved through informal referrals, presented a systemic problem and/or a complainant requested that a written complaint be filed. In FY2025, the OIJO filed **five** complaints on behalf of IDJJ youth. As spoken to above, most of the issues reported to the Ombudsperson are addressed informally by referral to Illinois Youth Center administrators or DJJ Executive Staff. Formal complaints were typically investigated by the Office and discussed with DJJ leadership before they issued a written response. This year complaints spanned a few critical issues including: staff misconduct, deprivation of education, and egregious facility response following major disturbance, prolonged isolation, and excessive use of force.

- Staff Misconduct and Unjustified Rom Confinement at IYC Chicago
 - o In August 2024, most of a living unit were held in their rooms over the course of a weekend. During that time, the youth missed routine medications and meals. Unit staff ignored pleas from the youth and pointed to chain of command. The explanation and pretextual justification were "administrative holds."
- Prolonged Confinement and Punishment After Major Incident at IYC Warrenville
 - o In November and December 2024, a young person was placed on a "safety plan" after committing a serious staff assault. That plan called for her to be placed on a living unit alone under intensive supervision. This plan lasted for weeks and it detailed intentional isolation, no movement outside of the unit,

no educational services and no programming. This plan was ostensibly approved by leadership at the highest levels and despite the restrictiveness of the intended plan, execution was even more restrictive. She received no large muscle exercise, no graduated access to socialization and received no clear date for return to regular programming.

- Staff Harassment and Deprivation of Education at IYC Chicago
 - o In March 2025, youth complained about chronic issues with the alternative school principal. They complained that he singled certain youth to antagonize, visited them on the housing units to check for school readiness, and unnecessarily used physical intervention. Youth also complained that the principal repeatedly kept them from attending school or unjustifiably removed them from class leading to days of missed school until the issue was resolved to his satisfaction.
- Excessive Use of Force at IYC Pere Marquette
 - o In March 2025, a young person complained that a security staff supervisor responded to him taking extra food from the dining room by following him into the bathroom and physically accosting him to give up the food. The youth left that incident with a major behavioral ticket for stealing food as “contraband” but the use of force complaint was “unsubstantiated” because there was no camera surveillance in the bathroom to corroborate the youth’s description of staff conduct.
- Excessive Use of Force at IYC Pere Marquette
 - o In May 2025, a young person complained that a security staff supervisor responded to him taking food from the dining area by chasing him, grabbing him, twisting his arm and slamming him into a wall.

Recommendations

For IDJJ, below are our continued recommendations regarding the systemic issues detailed above:

- Youth and staff who are directly involved in similar critical incidents should be brought together to sit in restorative peace circles facilitated by trained peacemaking circle keepers where they can openly discuss what happened, explain their perspective, take responsibility for their part in the harm that was done, and reach consensus about what everyone needs to feel safe in the future.
 - o This response could have helped resolve the tensions detailed in the complaint above between youth and the school principal at IYC Chicago.
- This Office wants DJJ to follow, in good faith, its policy on the usage of behavioral holds. The relevant policy reads in part: “It shall be the policy of the Department to utilize de-escalation techniques and minimize the use of confinement. Staff should make every reasonable effort to avoid confinement when possible and first attempt less restrictive techniques.”

- Staff members with a history of staff assault allegations should be retrained and if training fails, they should be assessed for their suitability for working with troubled teens. Assign staff members with a history of misconduct allegations and/or staff assaults charges to positions and areas where they have little to no contact with youth.
 - Perhaps if the Department followed this recommendation from last year's report, the complaint incidents at IYC Pere Marquette this year wouldn't have happened.
- Install high quality video and audio equipment and eliminate blind spots in all Illinois Youth Centers for the protection of both staff and youth. Require staff use camcorders or body worn cameras to videotape and audio record interactions between youth and staff that occur in youths' rooms and walks between installed camera blind spots.
 - Perhaps we would have seen substantiated investigations into the staff misconduct allegations at IYC Pere Marquette if we had better video and audio evidence.
- Contract with community based mental health providers experienced in addressing the needs of traumatized and mentally ill African American youth. Create a specialized treatment team or contract with a community provider to serve youth with the most challenging behavior. The unit or provider should employ a multicultural, multi-systemic treatment team experienced in assessing, treating and succeeding with this population of youth.
- Regularly review movement logs to ensure that youth are receiving adequate hours of education, recreation and mental health services.
 - With more regular review and enforcement of movement logs, Department leadership could have intervened sooner to address the improper safety plan at IYC Warrenville.

For County-Operated Detention Centers, we don't yet have enough data points to make sweeping recommendations. In the next year, when we add more dedicated detention staff, complete more in-depth visits, and hear from more youth and their loved ones, we'll be better suited to share recommendations for improvement.

And overall, for FY2026, our recommendation to Illinois juvenile justice stakeholders, both system actors and external advocates, is to listen to our young people. Let's focus our efforts on prioritizing the voices of those most impacted and most overlooked.