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Testimony in favor of ACR 18

Here in strong support of ACR 18 and the seven areas of study outlined in the resolution.

I was involved through my professional capacity with the Children's Cabinet in the first juvenile justice study, chaired by Assemblywoman Jan Evans, testifying at various hearings as a community person involved in youth programs.

I was appointed to serve at the last meeting of the 2nd Juvenile Justice study, chaired by Senator Weiner. While both those studies were important milestones for our state, I think clearly there is a pressing need for a third study to address the issues outlined in ACR 18.

It was in January during our pre-session budget hearings that I first heard the words CRIPA Report used in conjunction with our juvenile justice system as DCFS outlined the need for additional staff. I asked for a copy of the report and read it that night, and was truly appalled at what the Dept. of Justice found there – their investigation was clearly a wake-up call for me that we need to be paying much closer attention to the operations of our youth correctional facilities, especially in the areas of excessive use of force, lack of mental health care, and a general culture of violence that I believe exists at the training center.

I've had concerns over the years about the level of mental health and substance abuse treatment provided in our youth correctional facilities, but until I read the CRIPA report last January, I did not realize the extent of the problem.

During this session I participated in the legislative visit to NYTC that you've already heard about from Mr. Horne. A few weeks later I traveled to Caliente with some of the legislative staff and DCFS/DHR staff to tour that facility.

I can tell you the Caliente facility is well kept and the staff seem committed to providing a safe environment for the boys and girls who are housed there. The problems of violence do not seem to be systemic as they are in Elko. I came away from the Caliente visit with another major concern that I'd like to share with you regarding the program used at the facility, especially with the female population, the Positive Peer Culture Program. I don't intend to debate the merits of the program with the staff here today – but that is something I'd like to see the ACR 18 study take on. I've read some of the material provided to me by the state as the basis for the use of this program which features a lot of group work, 'awareness' of other members of the group, to the point of using youth to monitor other youth's phone calls to ensure that personal problems are brought back to the full group for discussion.

I've been able to do some limited research on what is currently being published on the Positive Peer Culture model and I'd like to read you just a few paragraphs from a paper published by the Institute for Gender Responsive Services, called "Positive Peer Culture and Female Development."

The authors state: **“At most programs, PPC is used primarily to maintain order and to create a positive youth subculture by mobilizing the power of the peer group in a positive manner. However, the peer-based treatment models of the 1970s, including PPC, are based on assumptions of human and group behavior that come primarily from studies of young males. The most current studies and evaluations are challenging the traditional use of such models in modern treatment programs, serving males or females.”**

The second quote really fits my experience of visiting Caliente and observing the peer culture groups first-hand:

“In most PPC programs we have observed, the model itself evolves into a culture of artificial rules and norms which take on a life of their own. The very structure of the group process becomes a series of rules by which the group interacts both within a session and outside it, and that structure seems to be counterproductive or at least counter-indicated by recommendations of what a girls’ treatment group should look like, particularly since it often doesn’t even happen consistently throughout the program.”

I think the ACR 18 study should take a very close look at the PPC model and how it is employed in our facility and make sure that this 1970s era program is still the correct program we should be using with our youth in 2003.

As the chair of the Joint budget subcommittee on human resources, I can tell you that we have closed the DCFS budget granting the request for additional staff for Elko and Caliente as well as insisting on a budget amendment that provides mental health treatment to these youth as well as a the youth on parole and youth at the soon-to-be-Opened Summit View facility in Las Vegas. The budget amendment also includes additional training dollars for staff. I know Ms. G. and I are interested in looking at a more therapeutic correctional model for all our facilities, but we were not able to get there during the budget process.

All of these issues need to be closely monitored over the interim. We will be getting reports on the money issues at IFC but the ACR 18 study, in my mind, is the appropriate vehicle to provide the legislative oversight on staffing, programs and services, and operations of our facilities to ensure these youth can be rehabilitated into the capable and productive citizens we know they can be.