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## **NEW POLICY PAPER: TEXAS SHOULD BUILD ON REFORMS TO KEEP JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUTH IN THEIR HOME COMMUNITIES**

*Texas should “Raise the Age,” support effective regionalization approaches to help local juvenile probation departments succeed, and expand independent oversight to keep kids safe*

Austin, Texas—As Texas legislators consider a series of proposals that would change how young people are served by the justice system, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) released a policy paper today designed to help policy-makers focus on capitalizing on the recent progress the state has made in juvenile justice reform.

In *Unfinished Business: Deepening the Gains in Texas Juvenile Justice Reform*, TCJC highlights a recent Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center analysis on the success of the 2007 and subsequent reforms to Texas’ juvenile justice system, which showed that placing youth in their communities produces better outcomes than confining youth in state-run facilities. Since policy-makers enacted these reforms, taxpayers have saved money, and young people placed in their home communities were less likely to be arrested than youth placed in state-run facilities. Juvenile crime in Texas has also fallen.

While this is good news for youth and Texas communities, TCJC examined a series of ongoing challenges (or “unfinished business”) in juvenile justice reform in the policy paper, and makes a series of key recommendations to lawmakers that include:

- **Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction.** Texas youth will be safer, and less likely to reoffend, if they are served by the juvenile justice system and kept out of the adult system. Texas lawmakers should support “Raise the Age” legislation, such as HB 1205 (Dutton, McClendon, Wu, Rose), to bring 17-year-olds into the juvenile justice system.
- **Expanding independent oversight and providing more protection for youth in local juvenile corrections facilities.** Lawmakers should support proposals to expand the jurisdiction of the Office of the Independent Ombudsman (OIO), such as HB 3277 (Dutton), to assure that local facilities keep young people and staff safe. The OIO should have the ability to conduct unannounced facility visits, perform audits required under the Prison Rape Elimination Act, and investigate reports of abuse and neglect from youth.

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- **Increasing the state’s capacity to support local juvenile probation departments so they can serve more youth closer to home.** Texas needs a strong, well-resourced, sophisticated youth-focused agency that plays multiple, key statewide roles, and is focused on bringing out the best out of a locally-driven system. Lawmakers should support reform proposals, such as SB 1630 (Whitmire), which would improve the state’s ability to partner with local juvenile probation departments through a regionalization approach. As currently envisioned, SB 1630 would create a structure that provides financial incentives to localities to serve more young people in their home community, promotes better data and information collection related to the outcomes of youth, and further reduces the number of youth committed to state-run facilities.

“With a strong, adequately resourced, youth-focused agency, we can leverage effective regional approaches to help serve more young people closer to home, where we know they’ll have better outcomes,” says Dr. Ana Yáñez-Correa, TCJC’s Executive Director. “Let’s build on the success we have seen in juvenile justice reform, and address the unfinished business of having too many youth in the adult criminal justice system, too little oversight of local juvenile correctional facilities, and too little support for local juvenile probation departments seeking to help youth succeed in their communities.”

**TCJC makes several other recommendations to policy-makers to better serve justice system-involved youth, and build on the improving outcomes seen in the juvenile justice system.** Other key recommendations from TCJC to lawmakers include:

- Expanding prevention efforts to address the needs of youth by increasing coordination between systems that serve youth and families, such as child protective services, mental health services, and the education system;
- Increasing reliance on *effective* risk and needs assessments to inform decision-making throughout the juvenile justice system;
- Measuring the success of the system based on a broader set of positive outcomes for youth;
- Limiting the number of youth in local juvenile corrections facilities; and
- Implementing a strong statewide strategy to reduce racial and ethnic disparities.

Visit this page for TCJC’s report, *Unfinished Business: Deepening the Gains in Texas Juvenile Justice Reform*: <http://tinyurl.com/UnfinishedBusinessPaper>

Visit this page for the executive summary of the report: <http://tinyurl.com/UnfinishedBusinessExecSum>

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*TCJC works with peers, policy-makers, practitioners, and community members to identify and promote smart justice policies that safely reduce Texas’ costly over-reliance on incarceration – creating stronger families, less taxpayer waste, and safer communities.*