



June 29, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Skinner  
Chairperson, Public Safety Committee  
California State Senate  
State Capitol, Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: Protecting Youth Amid COVID-19 Crisis at DJJ**

Dear Senator Skinner:

We write to urge immediate action to protect youth in the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) where three young people have tested positive for COVID-19 since June 14. Young people are not safe from the virus until the state suspends intake into the facilities and drastically reduces DJJ's population through systematic releases, prioritizing youth who are medically vulnerable or likely to be released within six months.



*Communal bathroom facilities at DJJ (left, middle). Open dormitory unit at DJJ (right).*

For decades, the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJCJ) has monitored conditions at DJJ and called attention to abuse and neglect within the facilities. Last year, we released a report bringing light to DJJ's appalling treatment of youth, including its high levels of violence, reliance on isolation, and unhealthy living conditions.<sup>1</sup> Now, we are gravely concerned that DJJ's pattern of neglect will continue, placing DJJ youth, staff, and our communities at risk.

As an organization that supports youth impacted by the justice system, CJCJ knows that young people are far better served in their home communities. Our organization and our partners across the state work with youth every day to support their development and prevent their return to the justice system. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, DJJ's rehabilitative programs and educational services are more limited than ever, making it impossible for the state to fulfill its basic obligation to young people. To uphold community safety and lessen health risks to youth, DJJ must safeguard all youth in its facilities and immediately reduce its population density.

COVID-19 has already arrived at DJJ. As of June 22, three youth<sup>2</sup> and five staff members<sup>3</sup> have tested positive for the virus. DJJ's youth are highly susceptible to COVID-19 given the facilities' unsanitary prison-like designs and

<sup>1</sup> Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. (2019). Unmet Promises: Continued Violence and Neglect in California's Division of Juvenile Justice. At: <http://www.cjcj.org/news/12466>.

<sup>2</sup> California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. (2020). Division of Juvenile Justice. At: <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/juvenile-justice/>.

<sup>3</sup> California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. (2020). CDCR/CCHCS COVID-19 Employee Status. At: <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/cdcr-cchcs-covid-19-status/>.


large populations (each holding over 150 youth).<sup>4,5</sup> Young people have daily physical contact with staff and one another, and many are still housed in large, open dormitory units with shared bathrooms. For youth at DJJ, this crisis carries the dual risk of debilitating illness and psychologically harmful isolation.<sup>6</sup>

COVID-19 travels quickly and grows exponentially. Congregate settings, such as nursing homes, cruise ships, or prisons have accelerated its spread, putting us all at risk.<sup>7</sup> If the reckless population transfers and sluggish approach to mitigation seen in adult prisons<sup>8,9,10</sup> occurs at DJJ, COVID-19 will continue to move through the youth population with little time to implement precautions or reduce density. To protect against a devastating outcome, we ask that you act now on the following recommendations:

- Assess and release all youth who are medically vulnerable and evaluate the remaining population for release by considering whether 1) they pose a physical risk to the community or 2) they are likely to be released within six months.
- Halt intake from county facilities;
- Make COVID-19 testing available to 100% of youth and staff in all DJJ facilities;
- Limit the movement of staff through the facilities to stop COVID-19's spread across living units; and
- Ensure that youth on quarantine have access to video communication with loved ones.

California must move quickly to prevent DJJ from becoming a viral tinderbox, threatening the lives of youth, staff, and residents in nearby counties. Every day that a youth spends at DJJ exposes them to additional risk — both from COVID-19 and from the violence, isolation, and traumatic conditions that have long defined life in the state institutions. Ending the influx of youth into the facilities and releasing youth who are ready to return home is essential to safeguarding the hundreds of Californians inside DJJ and the thousands beyond its walls.

Sincerely,



Maureen Washburn, Policy Analyst  
Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice

Cc: Tania Dikho, Office of Senator Nancy Skinner, [tania.dikho@sen.ca.gov](mailto:tania.dikho@sen.ca.gov)  
Jessica Devencenzi, Deputy Legislative Secretary, [jessica.devencenzi@gov.ca.gov](mailto:jessica.devencenzi@gov.ca.gov)  
Dan Seeman, Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Office of Governor Newsom, [daniel.seeman@gov.ca.gov](mailto:daniel.seeman@gov.ca.gov)

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<sup>4</sup> Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. (2019). Unmet Promises: Continued Violence and Neglect in California's Division of Juvenile Justice. At: <http://www.cjcc.org/news/12466>.

<sup>5</sup> Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. (2020). A Blueprint for Reform: Moving Beyond California's Failed Youth Correctional System. At: <http://www.cjcc.org/news/12842>.

<sup>6</sup> Kingkade, T. (2020). Coronavirus in juvenile detention is a nightmare scenario, doctors and advocates say. *NBC News*. At: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/coronavirus-juvenile-detention-nightmare-scenario-doctors-advocates-say-n1170256>.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, T., Weiser, B., & Rashbaum, W. (2020). Jails Are Petri Dishes: Inmates Freed as the Virus Spreads Behind Bars. *The New York Times*. At: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/us/coronavirus-prisons-jails.html>.

<sup>8</sup> California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. (2020). CDDCR Patients: Confirmed COVID-19 and Outcomes. At: <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/population-status-tracking/>. Note: As of June 29, 1,016 people have tested positive for COVID-19 at San Quentin. This represents more than 25% of the prison's population, making the rate of infection 58 times higher than rest of the state.

<sup>9</sup> Newton, C. (2020). COVID-19 prison problem as Cases soar at California's San Quentin. *Al Jazeera News*. At: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/covid-19-prison-problem-cases-soar-california-san-quentin-200625184510342.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Fagone, J. & Cassidy, M. (2020). UC health experts: San Quentin coronavirus outbreak could pose threat to entire Bay Area. *The San Francisco Chronicle*. At: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/local-politics/article/UC-health-experts-San-Quentin-coronavirus-15364257.php>.