

Aruna Miller
Lt. Governor

Governor

Betsy Fox Tolentino
Acting Secretary

July 30, 2025

Yvonne Briley-Wilson, Esquire
Maryland Correctional Ombudsman
Office of the Correctional Ombudsman
300 W. Preston Street
Baltimore, MD 21202

RE: JJMU Report

Dear Ms. Briley-Wilson:

I want to begin by thanking the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman (OCO) and the Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit (JJMU) for their continued oversight and partnership in working to improve the conditions and outcomes for youth in our care. The third and fourth quarter report highlights a number of serious concerns, many of which I recognized immediately upon assuming this role, and I appreciate the level of detail and urgency reflected in this report.

Since day one, I have been deeply troubled by the unacceptable conditions some of our young people are facing. Ensuring their safety and treating every youth with dignity, compassion, and respect remain my highest priorities. At the same time, I want to recognize and stand firmly with our frontline staff, who continue to show up for our youth, day in and day out, under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Their commitment and resilience are not only valued, they are essential to the progress our youth make.

In the weeks since my appointment, I have prioritized listening to staff, visiting facilities firsthand, and identifying where immediate change is needed. I have already launched a comprehensive staffing review to increase frontline coverage, initiated biweekly cross-departmental meetings to address workforce stabilization, and appointed a new Director of the Office of the Inspector General who reports directly to me. These are early but important steps in strengthening accountability, improving conditions, and supporting our staff and youth.

As Acting Secretary, I am fully committed to transparency and to ensuring that JJMU is not met with barriers in fulfilling its oversight responsibilities. JJMU plays a critical role in identifying issues and elevating the voices of youth and staff in our system. I will work to ensure that JJMU has appropriate, timely access to all information necessary to monitor DJS facilities and programs effectively.

This document includes the Department's detailed response to the recommendations outlined by JJMU, along with a list of actions I have already initiated to address the most pressing challenges. I view this process as an opportunity to implement meaningful, data-informed changes that not only address immediate concerns but also lay the groundwork for long-term, sustainable reform. Our commitment is to a system built on accountability, transparency, and shared responsibility to the young people of Maryland.

Immediate Actions Undertaken to Improve Conditions Across DJS Residential Programs

- Conducted facility visits across the state to observe conditions firsthand and speak directly with frontline staff.
- Implemented critical leadership changes in the DJS Residential Services Unit.
- Appointed an Acting Deputy Secretary and initiated a national search for a permanent leader to drive accountability and reform.

- Assessed urgent operational and staffing challenges, identifying longstanding shortages and resource gaps that hinder rehabilitative services.
- Recognized and affirmed the dedication of frontline staff who continue to show up and support youth under difficult circumstances.
- Ordered a comprehensive staffing review to increase frontline coverage in residential programs and improve staff-to-youth ratios.¹
- Launched biweekly cross-departmental meetings focused on workforce stabilization and addressing urgent staffing needs.
- Hired a new Director of the Office of the Inspector General, who now reports directly to the Acting Secretary, strengthening internal accountability and oversight.
- Strengthened interagency coordination to break down silos and ensure youth receive consistent, high-quality services across programs and placements.
- Launched a review of overtime (OT) usage and practices to ensure equitable staffing, reduce burnout, and improve coverage without compromising safety or service quality².
- Initiated a weekly data review with senior leadership to track key indicators and ensure strategic efforts are driving intended outcomes

DJS Response to OCO/JJMU Recommendations:

I appreciate the thought and urgency behind each recommendation. Many of them align with priorities my administration has already begun addressing, including safety and security, food service reform, family engagement, and increased access to programming.

Below is a point-by-point overview of each recommendation, indicating where efforts are already underway, where additional planning is required, and where I agree in principle but must assess operational or resource limitations before implementation.

This document represents a firm step toward collaborative, measurable reform. I remain committed to ensuring JJMU has the access and support it needs to conduct effective oversight without barriers. Transparency is not just a legal requirement; it is a shared value that must underpin our reform efforts.

Category	Recommendation	Response	Current/Planned Action
Sexual Abuse Allegation	Discontinue the Allowance of Privacy Screens	Current Policy	Strict enforcement reiterated
	No sharing of beds	Current Policy	Strict enforcement reiterated
	Accessible reporting system	Agree	Reviewing PREA vendors
	Provide Support Services	Agree	Ensuring that behavioral health is responding to incidents

¹ Between FY23 and FY25, the committed population increased by 22.34%, while the number of Resident Advisor staff budgeted positions declined by 33.5.

² There was a 6.2% reduction in overtime earned compared to the previous pay period.

	Enhance Staff-to-Youth Ratios	Evaluating	Evaluating staffing models and resources
	Staff Training	Agree	Training is being reviewed
Drugs and Contraband	Expand the Use of K-9 Units	Evaluating	Evaluating effectiveness for various types of contraband
	Hire Specialized Investigators	Agree	New OIG director hired with expertise in facility operations
	Invest in Drug Detection Technologies	Agree	Seeking funding options
	Enhance Targeted Surveillance and Searches	Evaluating	Developing a protocol
	Expand Access to Substance Abuse Services	Agree	Working with behavioral health to fill vacancies and deploy resources effectively
Safety and Security	Proper Safety Check and Documentation	Agree	Revised documentation protocols
	Lock Maintenance	Agree	Conducting quarterly checks
	Interpreter Services	Evaluating	Improving collaboration with the current vendor to problem solve
	Policy updates	Agree	Exploring a new policy unit and structure to facilitate timely review

	Budget Priority Adjustment	Agree	Assessing staffing priorities and conducting agency realignment of resources
	Incentive Hiring	Evaluating	Evaluating improved hiring practices and available incentives
Facility Sanitation	Sanitation Policy Plan	Agree	Evaluating draft facility plans
	Increase Regular Extermination	Implemented	Monthly extermination expanded
	Cleaning Protocol	Current Policy	Schedule posted in units; strict enforcement reiterated
Dietary and Food Services	Proper Labeling and Storage	Agree	Reviewed by kitchen managers
	Real-Time Meal Monitoring	Agree	Implemented youth feedback forms
	Special Diets Management	Agree	Logs verified with medical staff
	Feedback Mechanism	In progress	Dietary staff have conducted focus groups and “test kitchen” with youth. Continued feedback is a priority and policy will be updated
Basic Living Needs	Inventory Issuance and Tracking / Missing Items/ Feedback Mechanism	Agree	Evaluating to improve the tracking and feedback system

	Staff Access to Supplies / Regular Inventory Checks	Agree	Conducting refresher training for staff
	Training on Inventory Management	Agree	Support Services has taken over this function to ensure consistency across facilities
Improper Restraints	Implement Comprehensive Training Programs	Agree	All staff have been trained in SCM ³
	Enhance Oversight and Accountability / Documentation	Agree	Data is being collected – oversight will include ensuring timely reporting and accuracy
Frozen Time	Eliminate frozen time	Agree	Practice Rescinded
Educational Services	Graduate Service Program Development	Agree	Will work with incoming JSEP Superintendent
	YOLO Program Development	Agree	Developing YOLO protocols and program manual.
Board Meetings	Advisory Boards	Evaluating	Reengaging Facility Advisory Boards in facilities that are not active
Recreation/Family Engagement	Family Support/Reunification/ Counseling	Evaluating	Current family engagement efforts to support family connections and supportive reentry
	Update Emergency Plans	Agree	In process

³ Safe Crisis Management (SCM) is a trauma-informed, evidence-based system used by trained staff to prevent, de-escalate, and safely manage crisis situations involving aggressive or high-risk behavior in youth.

Green Ridge Evacuation	Leadership	Evaluating	In process – opening up leadership position at GRYC
	Prioritize Youth Well-being	Evaluating	Improving emergency plans to ensure continuity of care and access to programming
	Strengthen Communication and Coordination	Agree	Leadership is committed to ensuring effective crisis communication

The JJMU report provides a strong foundation for us to move forward and address longstanding challenges that arose under previous leadership. I am committed to working in partnership with JJMU to implement these recommendations, create safer and more supportive environments for our youth and staff, and ensure that our facilities operate with transparency, consistency, and accountability. Just as importantly, I will continue to support the frontline staff who carry out this incredibly important work every day. Their dedication is essential to our success, and they deserve the leadership, resources, and training necessary to meet this moment. I look forward to discussing our progress during our regular meetings with JJMU leadership and maintaining an open, solution-oriented dialogue as I move ahead.

Sincerely,



Betsy Fox Tolentino
Acting Secretary

cc: The Honorable Wes Moore, Governor, State of Maryland
The Honorable Bill Ferguson, Senate President, Maryland General Assembly
The Honorable Adrienne Jones, Speaker, House of Delegates, Maryland General Assembly
The Honorable Andre Davis, Chairperson, Maryland Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform and Emerging Best Practices
The Honorable Dorothy Lennig, Executive Director, Maryland Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy