

December 15, 2008

Mental Health America of Texas Written Testimony Sunset Commission on Texas Youth Commission and Texas Juvenile Probation Commission

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comment on the Sunset Staff Report on the Texas Youth Commission (TYC), Texas Juvenile Probation Commission (JPC), and Office of Independent Ombudsman. As you may know, Mental Health America of Texas is a non-profit organization. Our vision is to develop a society where mental health is the cornerstone of public health, stigma is eliminated, and all Texans have access to comprehensive, high quality, and culturally competent care.

We commend the Sunset staff for identifying many of the significant issues that stymie appropriate mental health assessment, treatment, rehabilitation, and transition services for youth involved in the criminal justice system. Since the last legislative session, reforms have been initiated in the juvenile justice system albeit more slowly than should have been the case. Collaboration among TYC, JPC, Office of the Independent Ombudsman, counties, and courts is crucial to the reforms and the proper functioning of the juvenile justice system overall. However, it is not clear how the merger of TYC and JPC will accelerate the necessary reforms and, in the worst case, may delay those reforms.

The overall goal of the Mental Health America of Texas comments is to assure that youth in the juvenile justice system receive appropriate mental health assessment, treatment, rehabilitation, and transition services. Many of the reforms in the Sunset staff report should be mandated without the need and delay of merger. Other efforts as pertains to youth with mental health issues likewise could be begun without the need and delay of merger.

- Hold local entities and TYC/JPC accountable according to well-defined and appropriate performance measures.
- Create and use appropriate needs and at risk assessment tools to better serve and treat youth.
- Encourage counties to keep lower-risk offenders in their communities in appropriate treatment and settings.
- Encourage if not mandate counties to create and utilize community based alternatives prior to resorting to TYC.
- Assure all staff dealing with youth in the juvenile justice system are adequately trained initially and through appropriate continuing education.
- Assure better coordination not only between TYC and JPC but also among those 2 agencies and TCOOMMI and CRCGs to ensure continuity of care for youth with mental health needs.
- Assure data systems that are accurate, user-friendly, and coordinated among relevant agencies.

One of the eight legislative priorities for Mental Health America of Texas legislative for the 2009 legislative session relates to JPC:

Juvenile Justice

Support Texas Juvenile Probation Commission's 2010-2011 Legislative Appropriation Request Exceptional Item for \$6.5 million to assist juvenile probation departments to provide mental health assessments and services to juveniles under their jurisdiction with special focus on juveniles held in secure pre- and post-adjudication facilities. Support new funding to expand evidence-based community services to divert juvenile justice-involved youth from detention.



This priority exemplifies the Mental Health America of Texas approach to the Sunset report. Mental Health America supports concrete and proven measures to assure that youth in the juvenile system are assessed, treated, and re-integrated into communities in the most appropriate way.

For more information contact:

Gyl Wadge, Director of Public Policy