



November 1, 2024

Sheriff Floyd Bonner, Jr.
Chief Deputy Anthony Buckner
Shelby County Sheriff's Office
201 Poplar Avenue, Suite 902
Memphis, TN 38103

Dear Sheriff Bonner and Chief Deputy Buckner,

We write with profound concern about how recent operational decisions affecting the Youth Justice and Education Center (YJEC) are damaging the rehabilitation and development of young people in our community. The abrupt cessation of youth transportation services and rushed timeline for transitioning the detention center reflect choices that not only violate constitutional protections but, more critically, threaten to create a cycle of disconnection and recidivism that impacts all of Shelby County.

It is crucial to remember that the youth detained at YJEC are presumed innocent until proven guilty. Yet current policies are treating them as if their futures don't matter. The way we treat young people directly influences how they view themselves, their community, and their place in society. When we deny them family visits, restrict their access to support systems, and treat their court appearances as administrative inconveniences, we send a devastating message about their value – one that often results in increased defiance and disconnection from community.

The current situation creates multiple barriers to youth rehabilitation. Limited family visitation and restricted access to attorneys and support services don't just impact individual youth – they affect our entire community's safety and well-being. Research consistently shows that maintaining family connections and providing comprehensive support services significantly reduces recidivism rates. When we fail to provide these supports, we're not just failing these young people; we're compromising our community's future safety.

The rushed December 2024 timeline for transitioning facility control creates additional concerns. We are mid-budget cycle, limiting the ability to properly fund necessary services. Your office's threat of litigation regarding budget modifications creates further barriers to proper resource allocation. The transition timeline doesn't align with the fiscal year, creating funding gaps that could compromise youth services.



Therefore, we call for immediate action on three critical fronts:

1. Immediate Transportation Resolution:

- Resume youth transportation services with appropriate dignity and privacy protocols
 - Establish clear communication systems with families
 - Minimize disruption to education and programming
- Provide transparent documentation of resource constraints
 - Detail current staffing and budget limitations
 - Present solutions for addressing gaps
- Create interim solutions that maintain consistent court access

2. Structured Transition Planning:

- Extend timeline to align with fiscal year and proper planning
 - Account for budget cycle constraints
 - Allow adequate time for staff training
- Establish comprehensive operational framework
 - Develop clear staffing and service protocols
 - Create accountability measures
- Ensure family and community input in planning process

3. Youth Support Enhancement:

- Restore full family connection opportunities
 - Expand in-person visitation
 - Ensure families are informed about visitation protocol
 - Create supportive visitation environment, including enough space
- Fully utilize existing YJEC resources
 - Activate educational and vocational facilities
 - Utilize outdoor and recreational space and limit room confinement
 - Provide adequate confidential space for youth to meet with their attorneys and clinical staff
 - Implement wellness programming
- Provide comprehensive development services
 - Mental health and counseling support, including outside providers in a confidential area
 - Skill-building opportunities

The \$30 million YJEC was built to be more than a detention facility – it was designed to be a place of rehabilitation and hope. Its resources, including the culinary kitchen, computer lab, and outdoor spaces represent opportunities for young people to develop skills and envision different futures for themselves. When we leave these resources unused, we're not just wasting taxpayer dollars; we're wasting young lives.



Every decision we make about facility operations sends a message to detained youth about their worth and potential. Current policies are telling them they don't matter. This message doesn't just affect their court cases – it affects their self-image, their choices, and ultimately, our community's safety.

We stand ready to work with all stakeholders to develop solutions that truly serve our youth and community. However, we cannot remain silent while hasty administrative decisions threaten both the wellbeing of pre-adjudicated, detained youth and our community's future safety.

Sincerely,

Cardell Orrin
Executive Director, Stand for Children Tennessee

Aerris Newton
Government Affairs Director, Stand for Children Tennessee

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Senior Pastor, Gifts of Life Ministries

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cc:

Juvenile Court Judge Tarik Sugarmon
Dr. Stephanie Hill, Chief Administrative Officer, Juvenile Court
Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris
Shelby County Board of Commissioners
LaSonya Hall, Deputy Chief Administrator, Shelby County Government
Rebecca Davis, Chair, Countywide Juvenile Justice Consortium (CJJC)