

TESTIMONY

Ways and Means Public Safety Subcommittee

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Presented by:

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I am Executive Director for Janus Youth Programs in Portland. Janus is one of the largest nonprofit agencies in the state serving high risk youth. We have 44 programs at 20 different locations and work with over 600 teenagers and young adults daily. Our programs include the largest teen parent program in the state, runaway and homeless youth services in Portland and Southwest Washington, and the only emergency shelter/long-term shelter for minor victims of sex trafficking in the state.

In 1977, Janus began working with the state to provide services for youth in the juvenile justice/correctional systems. We pioneered the first program to accelerate transition from the state training schools, two of the first programs in the state to work with juvenile sexual offenders (one a prevention program to keep youth out of closed custody and one a transition program for 17-24 year old youth leaving closed custody institutions), and the first supervised apartment transition model for youthful offenders.

Janus currently operates four programs for OYA serving 38 youth daily, nearly all of whom come with a diagnosis of sexual offender. The only way we can safely serve such a high-risk population in open community settings is through the outstanding partnership we have developed with OYA over the years. In addition to OYA, Janus has contracts with Oregon DHS, Washington state DHS, Multnomah County, City of Portland and the Federal Government. I can state without a doubt that OYA is our strongest government partner. Their focus from the beginning has been on safety for communities, accountability for the youth, and the creation of evidence-based programs that help youth literally transform their lives. It is clear that this partnership is working for the youth, for their families, for the community and for the state.

For instance, OYA uses a national assessment tool to measure the level of evidence-based practice being utilized in community-based and institutional programs. Janus has consistently rated in the top level of these ratings—and the results translate directly to increased positive outcomes for youth. In our program for younger (14-18) sex offenders, we do not know of a single incident of sexual reoffending for over the past five years. Our programs for 17-24 year old young men transitioning from closed custody

institutions literally transforms tax-users into tax payers. We are, quite simply, operating Evidence-Based Programs that work.

What does this look like “on the ground”...let me introduce you to Stefan. Stefan was abandoned by his parents in El Salvador, physically abused by his relatives, and sent to a military school where he was gang-raped repeatedly. He moved to the U.S. to be with his mother and new step father and less than six months after arriving he was charged and convicted of sexually abusing his brother and found himself a registered sex offender.

Sent to Cordero rather than jail, it took over a year before we were able to break through his good soldier persona and get to the dark side others had felt but could not get him to speak of. During one of the countless anger exercises we did with him when he was laying on the floor punching a pillow, he began shouting the names of the boy's who had raped him and the details. After that came stories of his life as a child on the streets of his village and we began to see where the images of sex and death came from. He learned read, write and speak and comprehend English.

Stefan graduated from Cordero after 2 and 1/2 years. He graduated from Wilson High School with a 3.0 average and is currently living on his own, working at UPS and attending Portland Community College where he is studying to be an engineer. He has been out of Cordero for almost 2 1/2 years and has never had any legal problems. I am not underestimating the impact of our programs when I tell you that **“Miracles Happen Every Day”**.

In the last session, the Legislature made significant cuts in the OYA budget by reducing closed-custody institutional capacity. Although I did not support any cuts at the time, this was a way of minimizing long-term damage to youth and to communities. It did, however, push a significant number of very high-risk/high-need youth into community based programs. What did this look like?

- In Cordero which is our BRS program for younger boys (13-18), 90% of the youth have a diagnosis that requires psychotropic medications and psychiatric oversight. There is a severe shortage of psychiatric services in the Metro area and youth can wait as long as 90 days just to get a medication assessment. As a result, Janus PAYS for the psychiatrist and for a mental health specialist out of our extraordinarily rich BRS-4 rate.
- We have also seen a substantial increase in OYA youth who experience suicidal ideation and eating disorders. When these youth are in closed custody, they have very few options for long term mental health care.
- We are also seeing a major increase in mental health kids coming to us from the institutions. 4 out of 11 current BRS-3 transition clients have been diagnoses with extreme mental health impairments—and again, little or no community-based psychiatric support available for them.
- We are also seeing the long-term outcome of the 1990's meth epidemic—youth who have deficits in cognitive functioning, learning disabilities and attachment disorders—any one of which is a life-altering condition. When these youth enter

our programs, it is increasing dramatically the stress on program and staff and, again few if any community resources available.

In essence, what were designed as short-term BRS-3 and 4 programs that specifically were told NOT to do therapy have now become long-term psychiatric transitional programs without the resources to accomplish the job. This forces us to pay for these services which (psychiatric care and medication management) are extremely expensive which then drains even more resources from the underfunded BRS rates.

My concern is that in the face of potential cuts, the tendency will be this year to look at reductions in community capacity. I am here to day to tell you that any cut in the OYA Budget leads to potential disaster and any cuts in community-based programs virtually guarantees it. In fact, significant cuts to any of the resources for OYA youth would be a virtual strategic plan to increase school shootings, community violence and youth suicides.

I am not an alarmist, I am a realist—so let's get real. The common denominator for the “wave of gun violence” is not guns—it is disturbed young men without appropriate resources to assist them. Let's get real, 85% of teen suicide deaths are disturbed young men...without appropriate resources to assist them. Let's get real, closure of institutional or community bed capacity in OYA will push extremely disturbed young men onto the streets...without appropriate resources to assist them. The only homeless youth shelter in Portland is full every night and turning kids away—and over 90% of the youth we admit are boys, most often with chronic and severe substance abuse and mental health issues.

Ultimately, this is not a choice about budgets, it's about values. Further reductions in OYA will eliminate access to proven programs that work and shift these boys onto the streets...and eventually into adult jails or chronic homelessness. So I ask you today to reflect on the long-term safety of youth who have been committed to state care...to your care...and the long-term safety of our communities. Seen in this light, there really is no choice, only the courage to act.