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July 11, 2025

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Senator J.B. Jennings Tours Charles H. Hickey Jr. School Amid Ongoing Concerns Over Safety, Staffing, and Accountability

Baltimore County, MD - On Tuesday, July 8, 2025, Senator J.B. Jennings visited the Charles H. Hickey Jr. School in Parkville, a short-term, pre-trial juvenile detention facility, to evaluate safety conditions and respond to concerns raised by frontline staff and recent media coverage. The visit comes amid heightened scrutiny of the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS), following the resignation of the former Secretary. Senator Jennings was joined by newly appointed Acting Secretary Betsy Fox Tolentino, Esq., marking one of her first official site visits in the role.

The tour, guided by a longtime Hickey staff member, offered a detailed overview of daily operations, safety measures, and disciplinary procedures. Staff were actively engaged throughout the visit, and youth were observed participating in school-related classroom activities.

Senator Jennings asked direct questions throughout, focusing on how behavior is managed and how safety is ensured for both staff and youth. The team passed by a sign informing youth and staff how to report abuse, neglect or suicidal thoughts- confidentially during phone time. This answered one of the biggest questions regarding reporting unsafe behavior.

Following the tour, Senator Jennings and Acting Secretary Tolentino met to discuss the future of DJS. Senator Jennings opened the discussion with genuine concern, saying, *"We need a fresh start with this change in leadership. My community has been targeted by many youth offenders who aren't being held accountable. Community members are exhausted and feeling the strain on their finances and sense of wellbeing. We need to know that the days of catch and release are behind us, and find ways to get these kids, and Maryland, back on the right path."*

In looking at the department, which has been embroiled in controversy, Senator Jennings turned to the Acting Secretary, *"I was one of the leading voices calling for a state hiring freeze, something that is finally being implemented. But I've always emphasized the need for exemptions when it comes to public safety. Do the positions in your department fall under that category, or would they require reclassification to ensure critical roles are staffed?"*

Acting Secretary Fox Tolentino acknowledged the department's deep challenges and expressed a clear commitment to reform. Acting Secretary Fox Tolentino responded that she is working to reassign vacant non-exempt positions (PINs) to allow more frontline detention staff hires within the current budget.

Facility safety protocols were a key focus of the visit. Each room houses one youth, with 16 youths per unit. Ideally, two staff members are assigned to each unit, but staffing shortages often reduce that to one. While surveillance is constant, staff expressed concern that this level of oversight is not always enough. While the standard ratio at Hickey is one staff member per eight youths, that number of youths often increases in higher-needed situations, placing significant strain on staff and leading to youth frustration over delays in meeting basic needs. Acting Secretary Fox Tolentino acknowledged the issue, calling the current model unsustainable, and committed to addressing it through additional hiring and updating infrastructure to ensure staff can focus on the important task at hand, staying engaged with the day-to-day functions of the center.

When incidents occur, protocols include behavior assessments, individualized safety plans, and increased staffing in affected areas. Facility leadership is also required to notify parents, case managers, administrators, and other key contacts. Programs are in place to increase the leadership skills of the youth and build rapport between staff and youth residents.

When in the community, one topic remains in front of mind with constituents. Repeated criminal activity from juveniles who have slipped through the system, due in part to previous leadership, have had little-to-no consequences and have not been held accountable for their actions. Jennings stated, *"If you're released immediately after a car theft, what will stop you from immediately returning to that behavior?"*

Here's how Acting Secretary Fox Tolentino shared a recent policy change aimed at enhancing accountability:

1. A directive was issued last week mandating that any youth rearrested while wearing an electronic monitor be held in detention until their next court appearance.
2. In the same directive, she ordered that a service provider must be immediately deployed to begin addressing behavioral concerns. Acting Secretary Fox Tolentino acknowledged the importance of youth receiving coping strategies and life skills.
3. Another key change will require community detention officers to attend the court hearings of the youth they supervise, giving judges more context and reinforcing the idea that someone in the community is paying attention and invested in the young person's progress.
4. Expanded coaching and training for community detention officers.
5. The rollout of a modern data system to increase real-time analysis and allow staff to spend more time focused on youth and facility safety. The new system will enable real-time decision-making, reduce the administrative burden, and allow staff to spend more time focused on youth and facility safety.

"There's a long road ahead, but I appreciate the Acting Secretary's willingness to confront these problems directly and her offer of an open line of communication moving forward. The directive released last week marks a major shift from the former leadership's approach to juvenile crime." said Jennings. *"We owe it to our youth, our communities, and our correctional staff to get this right. The end to the catch and release repeat offenses will greatly improve our communities and the outlook for these offenders- they can learn that this behavior will not be tolerated and start making changes."*

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