

January 6, 2026

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:

The Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) appreciates the work of the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman and the Juvenile Oversight Division (JOD) in producing this 2025 quarterly report, covering July, August, and September of 2025. Independent oversight and accountability are essential to our shared goal of ensuring that every young person in Maryland's juvenile justice system is treated with dignity, fairness, and humanity.

DJS values its partnership with the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman and recognizes that transparent monitoring strengthens systems, identifies areas for improvement, and promotes meaningful change. The Department acknowledges the findings outlined in this report and takes seriously its responsibility to provide safe, structured, and supportive environments where youth can grow, learn, and succeed. In support of this responsibility, the Department conducted an internal realignment of agency resources and identified 50 existing positions that could be redeployed to strengthen frontline staffing, reduce operational strain, and provide immediate relief to staff working directly with youth.

Over the past six months, the Department has focused on stabilizing operations, rebuilding trust with stakeholders, and strengthening both residential and community-based services. Since

assuming this role, I have prioritized direct engagement with law enforcement leadership, juvenile and family court judges, State's Attorneys, public defenders, labor leadership, and community partners across the state. These conversations—along with statewide court visits and community forums—have been critical in grounding the Department's work in real-time system needs and shared expectations.

During this period, DJS has taken concrete steps to strengthen public safety and accountability while remaining committed to rehabilitation. These actions include issuing a directive requiring detention when a youth on electronic monitoring is arrested for a new offense; strengthening Community Detention operations through targeted training and real-time intervention strategies; and reinvesting significantly in community-based programming. This fiscal year, DJS is investing \$30 million in community services, including \$10 million in new initiatives. Programs such as Thrive continue to demonstrate promising outcomes, and the Department is expanding their reach to additional counties and populations, including youth at risk of gun involvement.

At the same time, DJS has prioritized rebuilding and supporting the workforce that makes this work possible. Over the past several months, the Department has focused on stabilizing residential leadership, recruiting for critical vacancies, reclassifying and redeploying positions to address staffing shortages, expanding programming and cognitive-behavioral training, and reducing reliance on overtime. Through sustained effort, direct-care overtime has been reduced by more than 11%, and staff are being equipped with new tools—such as Rewire CBT—to better support youth and maintain safety.

Educational engagement and student success are also central to this work. Juvenile Services Education Program (JSEP) new education leadership is strengthening the instructional model to improve student engagement, academic rigor, and literacy across DJS sites. The Department is expanding hands-on and creative learning opportunities while enhancing coordination between education staff and direct-care teams to ensure students have access to postsecondary and vocational pathways. This spring, JSEP will co-design a new instructional model with teachers and school leaders to ensure educational programming is responsive to individual student needs and aligned with each young person's reentry goals.

The Department is also strengthening its commitment to data-driven decision-making and transparency. Executive leadership now engages in regular data reviews to monitor key performance indicators, and in 2026 the Department will launch public-facing data tools to provide greater visibility into system performance.

The Department remains committed to acting on the recommendations identified in this report. We will continue to implement corrective measures, strengthen collaboration with oversight partners, and focus on improving conditions for both youth and staff across all DJS-operated and

licensed facilities. While challenges remain—including staffing pressures, facility maintenance needs, and access to behavioral health services for youth with complex needs—the Department is addressing these issues with urgency and purpose.

DJS looks forward to continuing its partnership with the Ombudsman’s Office to advance our shared mission of accountability, safety, and positive youth development.

Facility-by-Facility Overview

In alignment with the Department’s commitment to transparency and accountability, the following section provides a summary of DJS’s responses and corrective actions corresponding to the findings identified by the Juvenile Oversight Division (JOD). While many of the challenges described—such as staffing shortages, facility maintenance needs, and program limitations—reflect systemic issues faced by youth-serving agencies nationwide, DJS has taken deliberate steps to address each concern at the facility level. These include facility-level leadership stabilization, infrastructure improvements, enhanced oversight of medical and food services, targeted staff training, and the expansion of meaningful youth programming. The chart below outlines the Department’s ongoing corrective measures and progress toward ensuring that every facility operates safely, efficiently, and in full alignment with DJS’s rehabilitative mission.

Facility	Key Issues Identified by JOD	Department Response / Corrective Actions
Baltimore City Juvenile Justice Center (BCJJC)	Rodent infestation, HVAC issues, medical neglect incident, staff fatigue from overtime, limited weekend programming, YOLO delays.	Expanded the pest control maintenance schedule; climate system repairs are ongoing; increased medical supervision; initiated staff wellness and overtime reduction initiative; conducting YOLO program review.

Facility	Key Issues Identified by JOD	Department Response / Corrective Actions
Charles H. Hickey Jr. School (Hickey)	Food service safety violations; staff misconduct; youth safety lapses; slow medical response; exceptions-to-policy concerns	Food services audit and reinspection; increased oversight of food service leadership; full review of staff conduct and mandatory reporting compliance; re-emphasis on medical response timeliness; revised “removal from coverage” policy.
Cheltenham Youth Detention Center (CYDC)	High use of seclusion; failure to report misconduct; limited recreation; inventory and hygiene shortages	Staff retraining on seclusion policy; improved incident reporting and supervisory oversight; inventory tracking system for hygiene and clothing.
Lower Eastern Shore Children's Center (LESCC)	Increase in youth assaults; inadequate mental health resources; staff burnout; accountability gaps	Increased collaboration with MDH to identify treatment placements; strengthened audit and follow-up procedures; focus on staff wellness and retention.
Western Maryland Children's Center (WMCC)	Unsafe conditions; inadequate staffing; prolonged isolation incidents; limited programming; lack of trauma-informed care	New superintendent and assistant superintendent in place; stabilization of staffing and training in Rewire CBT; expansion of structured programming and family engagement.
Victor Cullen Center (Cullen)	Contraband (Buprenorphine, vapes), poor sanitation, minimal programming, extended youth stays	Comprehensive contraband task force review; staff retraining and accountability measures; increased therapeutic and recreation programming; improved transition planning for long-term youth;

Facility	Key Issues Identified by JOD	Department Response / Corrective Actions
		revamping treatment program to respond to longer youth stays.
Backbone Mountain Youth Center (BMYC)	Facility cleanliness; inadequate cultural hair/skin care; limited programming; staff misconduct incidents	Facility deep cleaning and upgrades; culturally responsive hygiene procurement; expanded recreational programming; exploring boundary training; enhanced supervision and accountability measures.
Green Ridge Youth Center (GRYC)	Leadership vacancies; staff sexual misconduct; excessive restraints; contraband	Identification of new superintendent; reinforcement of staff screening and supervision; exploring retraining on professional boundaries; strengthened contraband prevention protocols; cross-unit collaboration with BMYC for staffing coverage, and monitoring of restraint utilization.

Systemic Response and Department-Wide Priorities

In addition to facility-specific corrective actions, the Department has implemented a series of system-wide strategies to address recurring themes identified in the report. These department-wide priorities focus on leadership stability, workforce development, safety and security, youth dignity, access to care, equitable treatment, and transparency. Together, these initiatives reflect the Department's commitment to strengthening operations, supporting staff, and improving outcomes for youth across all DJS-operated and licensed facilities.

Priority Area	Key Challenges Identified	Department-Wide Actions and Strategies
Leadership & Accountability	Leadership turnover; inconsistent supervision; facility-level accountability gaps	Identifying new superintendents and assistant superintendents; structured mentoring and peer support for new leaders; implemented training to improve workplace culture; reinforced expectations for supervision; strengthened central-office oversight and communication with facility leadership.
Workforce Development & Staff Wellness	Staffing shortages; high overtime; burnout; training gaps	Comprehensive workforce strategy focused on targeted recruitment, expanded Rewire CBT training, formal mentorship programs, and staff wellness support.
Safety, Security & Contraband Control	Contraband presence; inconsistent enforcement; safety risks	Statewide Security and Contraband Prevention Review; enhanced staff training; improved coordination with the DJS OIG (Office of the Inspector General) and law enforcement; facility-specific vulnerability assessments.
Facility Conditions & Youth Dignity	Maintenance delays; sanitation issues; inadequate clothing and hygiene supplies	Facilities Quality Assurance Initiative; routine health and sanitation inspections; expanded clothing and footwear inventories; procurement of culturally responsive hygiene and personal care products.
Medical & Mental Health Care	Delayed responses; inconsistent care; limited access to behavioral health services	Enhanced medical oversight and accountability; increased access to telehealth and on-site clinicians; coordination with MDH for high-acuity placements.

Priority Area	Key Challenges Identified	Department-Wide Actions and Strategies
Programming, Education & Skill Development	Limited structured programming; youth disengagement; educational staffing challenges	Systemwide rollout of RISE and Rewire CBT; expansion of YOLO work opportunities; increased recreational, enrichment, and creative programming; collaboration with JSEP to strengthen instructional continuity, staffing, and updated educational standards.
Equity, Gender Responsiveness & Specialized Care	Inequitable access to services; insufficient gender-responsive programming	Expansion of gender-responsive programming; enhanced family engagement and restorative practices; soliciting new community-based placement options for girls.
Collaboration, Transparency & Continuous Improvement	Need for improved data visibility and interagency coordination	Continued communication with JOD I; development of public-facing data tools; ongoing collaboration with agency partners, MSDE/JSEP, and community providers; commitment to transparency and data-driven decision-making.

Conclusion

The Department of Juvenile Services recognizes that meaningful reform requires sustained effort, transparency, and a willingness to confront challenges directly. This response reflects the Department's commitment to addressing the issues identified in the Office of the Correction Ombudsman's Juvenile Oversight Division's report through concrete, measurable actions—both at the facility level and across the system.

While no single report or quarter can fully capture the complexity of this work, DJS remains focused on steady progress: strengthening leadership, supporting and retaining staff, improving safety and conditions, expanding access to care and programming, and ensuring that youth are treated with dignity and fairness at every point of contact. These efforts are grounded in data, informed by stakeholder engagement, and guided by the voices and needs of the young people we serve.

The Department welcomes continued oversight and collaboration with the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman and the Juvenile Oversight Division. Through ongoing dialogue, shared accountability, and a commitment to continuous improvement, DJS is confident that Maryland can continue to build a juvenile justice system that is safe, effective, and centered on rehabilitation and positive youth development.

DJS appreciates the opportunity to respond to this report and looks forward to continued partnership in advancing outcomes for youth, families, and communities across the State.

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