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## Juvenile Court Advisory Subcommittee Meeting

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Agency: [Cuyahoga County Council](#)

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## Summary

- The [Juvenile Court Advisory Subcommittee](#) listened to a joint presentation by the Cuyahoga County and State of Ohio public defenders' offices. The subcommittee also listened to a presentation by the Cuyahoga County branch of the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) organization.
- During the public defender presentation, the subcommittee talked about why Cuyahoga County has substantially higher numbers of child transfers to the adult criminal justice system (that is, [bindovers](#)). Issues around individual judges in the county and the types of cases involved were discussed.
- Chair Ronald Adrine indicated that the subcommittee should be able to finish its work by the end of March after completing surveys and interviews with parents, youth, and front-line staff at child-serving agencies.

## Follow-Up Questions

- I covered a subcommittee meeting in August 2024, and based on that it seemed as though a lot of the issues covered in this meeting were redundant. I looked at [my notes from the August meeting](#), and in both meetings there were discussions about the brains of youth not reaching maturity until their 20s, the shortage of behavioral health workers in the county, and direct funding into early-intervention programs to prevent incarceration. Both meetings even had the same statistic about 92% of detained youth having had at least one traumatic experience! Is going over the same material the best use of the subcommittee's time, especially since they are behind schedule (the subcommittee was supposed to finish its work by the end of 2024)?
- Is it realistic for the subcommittee to finish by the end of March? Today's meeting seemed pretty wide-ranging and spent a good deal of time on just the topic of adult

bindovers, so it's kind of hard for me to see how it all comes together into a final report with specific recommendations about the juvenile court system.

- The subcommittee discussed the allocation of funds to early intervention programs and toward specific decision/inflection points of youth in the juvenile justice system. Will this discussion get more specific and concrete (for example, cost-benefit analyses of various programs), and, if so, would that occur during public meetings or be released to the public?

## Notes

### Agenda

The agenda can be found [here](#).

### Roll call

The meeting began shortly after noon. All [members](#) were present at the beginning except for Marvin Cross, who joined around 12:20 p.m.

### New business

The meeting began with a joint presentation from the [Youth and Parent Defense Division of the Cuyahoga County Public Defender's Office](#) and the [Youth Defense Department of the Office of the Ohio Public Defenders](#). Brooke Burns (managing counsel, Youth Defense Office) from the state office joined the meeting virtually, while the following representatives from the county office joined in person: Cullen Sweeney (Chief Public Defender), Leah Winsberg (community engagement attorney), Kenyatta Johnson (social worker), and Keara Mullen (mitigation specialist).

Sweeney said the county office has 29 attorneys in the Youth and Parent Defense Division, along with seven social workers and parent advocates. The division handled 1,472 juvenile delinquency cases during calendar year 2024.

Highlights of the [joint presentation](#) include:

1. **Complexity of youth served** - 50% to 70% of youth involved in the juvenile justice system had ongoing mental health issues, and Winsberg said that 92.5% of detained youth had experienced at least one traumatic experience (with 84% having experienced multiple traumatic experiences). Later in the presentation,

Johnson talked about other social and environmental issues that affect youth in the juvenile justice system, including lead poisoning, family disturbances and domestic violence, and issues around homelessness.

- 2. Qualitative perspectives of parents and youth** - Winsberg presented quotes from youth offenders showing their preference for treatment instead of only punishment (“I want the adults to not label them as young criminals but to see them as kids.”). Johnson talked about how parents struggle to get help for their children after they commit small-scale offenses, which then can lead to more serious offenses where the only outcome is incarceration.
- 3. Discussion of youth bindovers** - Winsberg and Burns presented data showing a dramatic decrease nationally in youth arrests and incarceration over the past 25 years. In addition, while youth transfers to the adult criminal justice system (i.e., bindovers) have declined nationally, transfers have been increasing in the State of Ohio, with Cuyahoga County having substantially higher rates than other urban counties in the state (e.g., Franklin, Hamilton, Montgomery, etc.). This led to a discussion about the challenges of having an “apples-to-apples” comparison of Cuyahoga to peer counties in Ohio (due to different judges, different types of cases, etc.). Burns said that a more in-depth, granular analysis of court cases would be necessary to fully flesh out differences between Cuyahoga and peer counties. Finally, County Council Member Sunny Simon, who was in the audience, [commented](#) that the issue of bindovers is not something this subcommittee or council has control over.
- 4. Funding priorities and early intervention** - At multiple points during the presentation the speakers emphasized the importance of funding and putting resources into programs supporting people who commit lower-level offenses to save money on incarceration and detention.

After the public defender presentation, there was a [presentation](#) from the [Court Appointed Special Advocates \(CASA\) of Cuyahoga County](#) about the role of these volunteers in the criminal justice system. Present from the organization were Hannah Wiltshire (program director) and Nikita Stange (the community outreach and recruitment coordinator).

In Cuyahoga County, every juvenile must have a court-appointed [guardian ad litem \(GAL\)](#) to serve on a case. However, most GALs have large caseloads, while CASA volunteers have only one to two cases at a time and can provide more focused attention and

advocacy for each child. CASA volunteers interview the child, review court records, attend court hearings, identify resources for the child and family, and monitor progress of a court case over time.

Eighty-three CASA volunteers are currently available. The agency's goal is to have served 1,000 children by the end of 2025; it has served 875 since 2016. However, 1,508 children in Cuyahoga County could use a CASA volunteer at this time. Funding constraints prevent the agency from hiring more volunteer coordinators, which provide the necessary supervision and oversight of CASA volunteers. With more coordinators, more CASA volunteers could be deployed to advocate for more kids.

After the presentation, Adrine asked the CASA representatives to provide a written request for additional funding to the subcommittee's clerk for consideration for the subcommittee's final recommendations to council.

### **Public comment**

No individuals spoke during the time allotted for public comment.

### **Minutes approved**

The minutes from the Nov. 21, 2024, meeting were approved unanimously.

### **Miscellaneous business**

Cross said that a local FBI agent wanted to give a presentation to the subcommittee about guns in the community and what the FBI is doing. Cross will work to set up this presentation.

Adrine expressed his desire that the subcommittee finish their work by the end of March. The subcommittee discussed conducting surveys and interviews of parents, youth and agency case workers. While the subcommittee concluded that youth should be surveyed anonymously, Cross advocated for and was able to obtain an in-person interview option for youth.

### **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned unanimously around 1:45 p.m.

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