

Testimony on SB 367 to  
The Senate Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to share my concerns in regard to Senate Bill 367. My name is Sylvia Crawford; I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and the Executive Director of The Villages, Inc. The Villages is a Youth Residential Center II and operates 6 homes, 5 in Topeka and 1 in Lawrence. Each home can house up to 10 youth who have been adjudicated as Juvenile Offenders. Each home has either a house parent couple or a house manager in charge of the day-to-day operation of the home, as well as additional youth care workers to assist them. The houses are non-institutional settings that resemble traditional homes in many ways. Youth share a bedroom with one other youth, meals are cooked in the kitchen and eaten together in the dining room, homework is done at the dining room table and recreational activities, such as watching movies or TV shows, are available in the rec room. Outside activities like shooting hoops, riding bicycles and skate boards, going for walks and looking for wild life are a part of the daily routine. The youth attend public schools and are encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities. At any given time we have youth involved in football, basketball, track, wrestling, cross-country, soccer, choir, debate, theatre and ROTC. Assistance with school work is provided by tutors who come to each of the homes after school and all of the youth are expected to participate in a structured, daily study time. The house parents and house managers maintain very close contact with the school; no different than if these youth were their own children. They attend parent-teacher conferences, check grades and homework assignments on the school website and communicate with individual teachers as needed. Most of the youth who come to us are behind in credits due to not going to school on a consistent basis. We place a very strong emphasis on the importance of school and want to impress on our youth that getting an education is one of the best things they can do to improve their lives. In reviewing the data, each one of our youth who was in placement with us for the majority of the last semester, earned on average 3.3 credits, which means they successfully completed 6.6 classes. This number of credits per semester would result in graduation from high school in 3 ½ years.

As has been pointed out in previous testimony, the youth who are placed with us have many needs. The Villages works tirelessly to make sure all identified needs are addressed. We ensure our youth receive all necessary services, including drug and alcohol counseling, individual therapy, family therapy, sex offender treatment, anger management services, psychotropic medication management and cognitive behavioral treatment services. In fact this area is so important to us that when we had difficulty finding service providers in the community, we developed the services ourselves. We now have 2 licensed professionals who are qualified to provide sex offender treatment as well as family therapy with parents

and guardians participating by phone, if needed. In reviewing the data for 2014, 83% of our youth participated in a cognitive behavioral group, 48% attended drug and alcohol services, 11% received sex offender treatment services and 98% were involved in individual and/or family therapy. The numbers for 2015 are: 96%, 40%, 9% and 95%.

We encourage our youth to be involved in the community and develop a sense that they are part of and have responsibilities to something bigger than themselves. All of the homes participate in community service activities on a regular basis and we generally receive positive feedback on the behavior of our youth during these events. We make arrangements for any youth who wants to attend church and have several youth actively involved in the church of their choice. We attend community events, performances and festivals as part of our philosophy that all youth need to learn and practice how to behave appropriately in a public setting.

One of the concerns that has been brought up frequently in the past months is the issue of youth going AWOL. The PEW Charitable Trust Report on Key Data Findings from the Kansas Juvenile Justice Work Group, which has been referenced often, states that 36% of youth who are placed out of home went AWOL in 2014. However, it is important to put these statistics into context. According to the website for the National Conference of State Legislatures, as well as several other national organizations' websites, 1 in 7 (14%) of US youth in the general population between the ages of 10-18 will run away. Furthermore, 68% of these runaways are between the ages of 15-17 and 2 out of 3 runaways have a DSM diagnosable mental illness. Most of the youth in the YRCII population would fit these high risk indicators: they are usually between the ages of 15-17, and the National Center for Mental Health & Juvenile Justice found that 70% of youth in juvenile justice systems have at least one diagnosable mental health disorder. The National Run Away Safeline reports that 70% of the youth describe their decision to run away as something that happened "at the spur of the moment" and was not a well thought out decision. When we look at the numbers of youth who run away from their own homes, the statistics provided by the PEW Charitable Trust aren't so staggering. The unsuccessful discharge rate due to AWOL for The Villages was 12% in 2014 and 19% in 2015.

Over this past week there has also been a lot of discussion about the success rate of YRCIIs; however there does not seem to be a consistent definition of what success means and how it is measured. As has been pointed out by the Juvenile Justice Workgroup, there are some significant limitations in regard to the data that is available for youth in DOC

custody. No recidivism data is collected and reported other than for youth who are released from JCF. The PEW Trust Report refers to failure as meaning the youth went to another out-of-home placement. If a youth comes to The Villages and it is determined by assessments completed by outside entities that they need to go to an in-patient drug and alcohol treatment program or to a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility, should that be reflected as a failure on the part of The Villages?

As a social worker, of course I am in favor of developing more services that can be accessed by families in order for them to be able to keep their children at home. However, after working in both the child welfare and the juvenile justice field for the past 29 years, I can tell you with certainty there will always be children and youth that need an out-of-home placement option and whose needs can't be met in a foster home. What will happen to these youth? It has been my experience that it is extremely difficult to find foster homes that are willing to accept the youth we have at The Villages. Their behaviors typically can't be tolerated in foster home settings. If they are moved over to the CINC side, where will they go? Have resources been developed in that system to accommodate an influx of youth? Is it realistic to think that a 17 year old, who still has 2 years of high school to complete, can live in a CIP independent living program? Would our own children be successful if placed in that situation?

I would ask that you more carefully consider the implications of eliminating YRCII as a placement option for youth in DOC custody. The closure of the State Hospitals comes to mind as a worst case scenario to be repeated here. It will be devastating if no placement options are available and it becomes apparent that not all families are amenable to services in their home and that some youth need to be placed in an environment that provides more structure and support than the family or a foster home can provide, yet none will any longer exist. Then what?

We view The Villages as a successful public-private partnership. The State pays us a *per diem* per child to work hard on behalf of the State to turn the very troubled youth that reside with us into contributing members of our society. We acknowledge that the *per diem* is significant and that we are not always successful; however that may reasonably be defined and determined. But it should also be recognized that we supplement the State's *per diem* with donated funds to cover our costs and that other alternatives such as foster care or home/local community-based services are not going to work for all of the troubled youth we serve.

Thank you for your time and attention. In closing, I would like to extend a sincere invitation to all of you to come out for a tour and get a first- hand look at what a YRCII is like.