

Contact:
Fernando J. Muñiz, MPA
Executive Director
Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance
2470 Fairfield Avenue
Bridgeport, CT 06604
(203) 579-2727, ext. 307

**Testimony before the Bridgeport City Council
Regarding the Proposed Bridgeport Juvenile Detention Center**

Good evening. My name is Fernando Muñiz and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance. We are located at 2470 Fairfield Avenue. The mission of the Alliance is to promote a safe, effective, and equitable continuum of service for young people involved in, or at risk of involvement in, the juvenile justice system. It is in this capacity that I speak tonight regarding the detention center.

You will hear testimony this evening from many who oppose this project because of economic development concerns. Beyond **where** to build this facility, however, there are also many concerns about **what** the state wants to build in Bridgeport. According to the Connecticut General statutes, there are only five legal reasons for placing a youth in detention after arrest. These include: if there is a strong probability the youth will run away, not appear for their court hearing, or commit additional crimes. Young people can also be held for other jurisdictions or if they are a danger to themselves or to public safety.

The state of Connecticut wants to build a facility in Bridgeport to house up to 88 of these young people. In the juvenile justice system we call this proposed facility a detention center. In the adult system, we would call this building a jail.

In a recent study, The Bridgeport Juvenile Justice Task Force found that only 21% of the children in the detention center were there for a violent crime. More than 60% of the children in detention were there for violating a court order or for a technical violation. Many young people find themselves in detention because well meaning court and police personnel place them there to secure treatment for serious mental health, substance abuse or other special education problems. Is a jail really the best place for these young people?

Our current detention center has housed anywhere from 8 to 25 youth for the past year. Juvenile crime has been decreasing for the past decade and is now at its lowest point since 1988. Why is the state building an 88-bed facility in Bridgeport? A better

investment would be to build a juvenile court, a 33-bed detention center with room for later expansion, and a continuum of community based services for young people who do not need to be confined. Using similar approaches, cities across the country have reduced their reliance on secure confinement without jeopardizing public safety.

We urge the city council to take a position against the scope of this project. As a matter of policy, this state should not be in the business of putting large numbers of children in jail because we don't have the programs to serve them appropriately in the community. We need to make better choices about how we treat the young people in our juvenile justice system.