

County Officials Must Act Now to Protect Foster Youth

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Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Cuyahoga County, a local foster youth advocacy organization, calls on Cuyahoga County leaders and elected officials including Executive Armond Budish to respond quickly and effectively to the growing placement and safety crisis resulting from foster youth being housed at the Jane Edna Hunter office building. The building's namesake, Jane Edna Hunter, a prominent Black social worker and attorney from Cleveland, would be appalled at the apathy currently being demonstrated towards vulnerable children in the County's care. CASA of Cuyahoga County categorically rejects the premise that nothing can be done to address this crisis, and would like to offer some concrete recommendations.

First, we echo what County Executive candidate Chris Ronayne recently said, and call for the urgent creation of a limited scope task force comprised of local child welfare experts to help address the immediate safety needs of youth taken into custody. We also recommend the hiring of additional trained security or intervention staff to quickly apply supervisory and preventive factors to lessen the risk to children and DCFS staff of physical or sexual assault while in the building. Separating children and youth in the facility by age and sex, increasing the levels of paid supervision for each age group, and preventing children from leaving the building in groups or without supervision are some possible measures that should help to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct among those in custody.

Second, we call for any reports or suspicion of sexual abuse or assault among youth in custody to be properly investigated. To hear of potentially unaddressed accusations of sexual assault, abuse, and even sex trafficking among our community's most vulnerable children while in county custody is abhorrent, and further undermines the public's level of trust in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we call for the leaders of CCDCFS to sit down and negotiate in good faith, using a third-party facilitator if needed, with residential care providers for the needed foster care placement contracts. We propose that a lack of trust, caused by years of deteriorating collaboration between CCDCFS and many providers, has directly led to this crisis. Mending this will involve understanding, rather than dismissing, the valid concerns of these agencies regarding the accelerating staffing costs and risk to both employees and other residents posed by accepting these challenging foster placements.

The children and youth currently being housed at the Hunter building are predominantly older, compromised youth exhibiting severe acting out, criminal, sexual, and/or violent

behaviors; they are typically not younger children coming into the agency who are suitable for a foster home placement. As such, they are difficult to house in the community, and as the recent Cleveland.com article reveals, often pose a significant safety risk to themselves and others. It is also clear that COVID-19 has dramatically altered the hiring and retention environment for most organizations, and reliable staffing now comes at a premium. We therefore call on CCDCFS to both offer appropriate reimbursement to agencies and grant them discretion in which youth they accept.

Furthermore, as a longer-term remedy to this ongoing placement problem, we propose the creation of a new Placement Office. The Placement Office could effectively handle all placements for any Cuyahoga County agency, excluding commitments of delinquent youth by the Juvenile Court to ODYS facilities; this office will recruit and work with treatment/placement providers to create treatment options to meet the needs of all Cuyahoga County children, particularly the older, hardest to place youth. This would allow CCDCFS to develop a more targeted and expedited approach to finding immediate suitable and safe foster placements, rather than rely again and again on the last resort of housing children in their office building.

With \$600 million in ARPA funding floating around the County, cost can no longer be an excuse for our local leaders failing to act. Vulnerable foster youth in Cuyahoga County custody deserve to be appropriately housed now.

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