

# RAISE the AGE | NY

May 15, 2020

City Council Speaker Corey Johnson

City Council Member Keith Powers, Chair of the Criminal Justice Committee

City Council Member Deborah Rose, Chair of the Committee on Youth Services

City Council Member Stephen Levin, Chair of the Committee on General Welfare

*Via email*

Re: Protecting at-Risk and Justice-Involved Youth During the COVID19 Crisis and Recovery

Dear Speaker and Council Members:

**As you know, Mayor de Blasio's FY2021 Executive Budget eliminated over \$213 million in summer funding for essential youth activities and programming at a time when adolescents and young adults are more vulnerable than ever before.** We write on behalf of the Raise the Age NY Campaign asking you to immediately plan for and dedicate resources to our City's adolescents and young adults involved in, or at risk for contact with, the juvenile and criminal justice system during the COVID19 crisis. While we understand that the crisis has created an unparalleled budget challenge for the City, we must ensure that basic policies and funding are in place so that we do not fail our most vulnerable youth.

Beacons, COMPASS summer camp, SONYC summer camp, NYCHA Cornerstones, and the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) have all been suspended. While SYEP is an important resource for all of the City's youth, its suspension is particularly devastating for at-risk and system-involved youth because SYEP reached almost 8,000 youth through the special initiatives model, providing comprehensive outreach and support for SYEP participants who are homeless, in foster care, justice system-involved or living in NYCHA housing. Also, SYEP recently expanded its reach to students through the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice's Cure Violence program, serving over 2,200 youth through these programs.

**Meanwhile, as recent reporting has highlighted, City policing during the COVID19 crisis to enforce social distancing poses risks to communities of color, and places adolescents and young adults at risk of unnecessary justice-system involvement, including arrest and detention.** Youth who have been disconnected from school, jobs, friends and community activities for months, who are experiencing extreme stress, hunger, and, in some cases, unmet mental health needs are more likely to have law enforcement contact. To address this situation before it escalates, the City must transfer responsibility for social distancing

enforcement away from the NYPD and ensure that systems are in place to connect youth with resources outside of the court system. This requires a plan.

**We urge you to ensure that the City creates a blueprint for success for adolescents and young adults involved in, or at risk for contact with, the courts that recognizes the enormous challenges youth and families face.** Specifically, this must include: (1) financial support for youth, (2) in-home mental health services and resources to promote connectedness and family stability; and (3) an approach to social distancing COVID19 enforcement and youth policing that promotes public health and diverts young people away from the court system.

**(1) Restore Summer Youth Employment Program and Permit Flexible Youth Programming and Direct Financial Support**

(a) Invest in Creating Remote Programs, Employment and Stipends

We agree with Teens Take Charge, and their allies, including [twenty-eight City Council members](#), Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, Controller Scott Stringer, Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, who have called for a \$1,000 stipend for remote jobs, training courses, or career-readiness programs.

While some community-based organizations working with our justice system-involved youth have already started retooling summer jobs and programming for youth to work remotely and provide youth with needed financial support, other organizations will need up-front funding to work quickly to develop similar capabilities to engage young people. Organizations need both flexible funds and guidance now to create programs that can be effectively administered for youth this summer.

(b) Flexible Funding to Support Youth-Adult Connections

As our young people are subject to confinement in their homes for longer and longer periods of time, they have fewer contacts with supportive adults in their community, who are a cornerstone of positive youth development. Evidence shows that positive youth-adult connections promote healthy behaviors, and help prevent court involvement. Many SYEP provider organizations and City partners have expertise in youth development, family engagement, counseling and mental health. The City should identify and preserve funds for remote engagement with young people, including check-ins, mentorship, and, where necessary, referrals to other community-based services and supports.

**(2) Mental Health Management and Crisis Intervention**

One of the most effective ways of reducing young people's contact with the justice system is to invest in mental health services that meet the needs of youth and their families. The City must organize and plan for these needs escalating with the lengthening period of home confinement, the impacts of unemployment, and the community loss of life that has resulted from COVID19. Resources available through the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Department of Education, Department of Probation, Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and community-based partners should be coordinated and deployed to serve youth and families in

their homes through remote supports during the summer and as long as stay-at-home orders are in effect.

### **(3) Decriminalization of Youth**

#### **(a) De-escalation and Avoiding Arrest**

As long as the City's police force is the primary mechanism for social distancing enforcement, we face the risk of exacerbating existing disproportionate court involvement for youth of color during the COVID19 crisis. This is going to be a very difficult summer for young people. Inevitably, youth who have been disconnected from school, jobs, friends and community activities for months, will make their way outside. The City must develop a corps of individuals outside of law enforcement, with preference given to organizations that already have a presence in the most heavily policed neighborhoods. When they must interact with youth, police must be equipped to use a light touch as much as possible. De-escalation should be prioritized at every level, and referrals to community-based services should be used in lieu of arrests and summonses, particularly for youth with mental illness and developmental delays. The NYPD should resort to arrests for only the most serious offenses with an eye towards detaining as few young people as possible.

#### **(b) Increasing Mental Health Response**

The collective stress and trauma of the COVID19 crisis on communities is impacting youth. The City should anticipate, and employ, mental health responses to youth behavior instead of police interaction, deferring to mental health providers to intervene where young people are in distress.

As the City budget process proceeds, adolescents and young adults at risk of, and who have contact with, the court system must be priorities. Reducing services and supports while putting public health enforcement in the hands of police is a dangerous combination that places young people at risk. We must plan for and make necessary financial investments during the COVID19 crisis now.

Sincerely,

BronxConnect  
Campaign for Youth Justice  
Center for Community Alternatives  
Children's Defense Fund-NY  
Children's Rights  
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York  
Covenant House  
Dignity in Schools Campaign-NY

Families Together in New York State  
Good Shepherd Services  
Justice for Families  
New York Civil Liberties Union  
The Brotherhood/Sister Sol  
The Legal Aid Society  
Youth Represent  
YVote/Next Generation Politics

cc: Mayor Bill de Blasio, Public Advocate Jumaane Williams