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New Report, *Families Not Facilities*, provides solutions and recommendations to fix the broken youth justice system of the Department of Children's Services (DCS).

NASHVILLE, TN - *Families Not Facilities*, a new report released today on-line by Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT) and the Youth Law Center (YLC) describes the dismal situation for vulnerable youth across the state.

Most importantly, the DRT/YLC report includes additional findings and focuses on a series of recommendations, solutions and steps that need to be taken to improve the situation for children, families and youth trapped in the systems of DCS.

The primary recommendation is that it is better to invest in families not facilities as the most successful and cost-effective way to prevent youth from getting into the youth justice system in the first place -- and to rehabilitate those caught in the system.

Since the recent scathing state Comptroller Audit Report and state legislative hearings, a consensus has emerged that the Department of Children's Services is failing Tennessee children, youth and families and that their youth justice system, in particular, is designed to fail.

"We are talking about young Tennesseans who have experienced trauma, often while in the custody of our own state Department of Children's Services," noted Lisa Primm, Executive Director of Disability Rights Tennessee. "We owe it to these youth to provide effective treatment and appropriate education so that they can return healthier to their communities. And we must fix the system for those who will come after them, by creating community supports so that they never end up in this situation," Primm added.

"Tennessee's families and communities are our strength- we are calling for our state's leaders to invest in family and community-based solutions that have a proven track record in helping youth and families grow, heal, and thrive," said Jasmine Miller, the Youth Law Center's staff attorney based in Nashville.

In April 2022, the two groups issued a comprehensive, groundbreaking report, *Designed to Fail*, focused on the dangerous conditions of TN youth justice facilities. The data and research in the earlier report was based on public information, personal visits and interviews at the Wilder Youth Development Center and is an example of problems state-wide.

Since then, the Joint Ad Hoc Committee on Juvenile Justice of the TN state legislature has placed its focus on facilities and where to place youth, without discussion of how to adequately assess and serve them.

“This focus on facilities by the legislature causes concern that there will be an uptick of transfers of youth to the adult system and harsher penalties for youth committing certain offenses,” noted Primm.

“Simply put, more incarceration of youth is not the way forward; it is not in the best interest of children and families, nor is it the most cost-effective,” added Miller.

Earlier this December, a scathing Performance Audit Report by the State’s Comptroller’s Office confirmed a multitude of deficiencies and system wide failures on the part of DCS that have endangered the welfare of children in the Department’s custody. The Audit examines the Department’s compliance and program effectiveness. *Families Not Facilities* provides a framework for transformative practices to promote healing, growth, and safety for Tennessee’s youth.

The findings in the DRTN/YLC combined reports along with the painfully devastating audit demand urgent and immediate action by DCS.

The *Families Not Facilities* report has a series of six major recommendations to bring families into focus as the Tennessee Legislature examines different approaches to much needed reform within the youth justice system. In order to bring families into focus, the report includes details on each of the following recommendation:

- **Invest** in proven, family-centered interventions, rather than ineffective, expensive, and dangerous facilities.
- **Utilize** multidisciplinary teams to assess youth and family needs, and to build the services that will meet those needs.
- **Address** racial and geographic disparities in the availability and quality of services across the state.
- **Build** out community-based mental health services for youth and families.
- **Focus** on upstream services to mitigate against child welfare and youth justice systems crossover youth.
- **Reaffirm** Tennessee’s commitment to youth justice by ending administrative transfers to the adult criminal justice system.

The DRTN/YLC report also provides background on the earlier *Designed to Fail* report and describes other important developments:

- The 2022 Performance Audit confirms DCS’s failures are system-wide; underscores the prevalence of abuse in residential facilities and highlights the continued lack of vision.



- A growing consensus that DCS is in a state of turmoil;
- Legislative responses to youth justice challenges are overly focused on facilities.

Families Not Facilities and the earlier report, *Designed to Fail* are available on-line at www.DisabilityRightsTN.org and www.YLC.org

Spokespeople from both organizations will be available for interviews throughout the holiday season.

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Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT) is the designated Protection & Advocacy (P&A) agency for Tennessee. DRT provides free legal advocacy services to protect the rights of Tennesseans with disabilities, and has broad access authority to monitor facilities, including juvenile justice facilities, and to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect. www.DisabilityRightsTN.org.

The Youth Law Center is a non-profit law firm that advocates to transform foster care and juvenile justice systems across the nation so that every child and youth can thrive. For over 40 years, Youth Law Center has pursued policy and advocacy to protect the rights of youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and to promote positive youth connections to community and family. The Youth Law Center is headquartered in San Francisco, California, with staff in Tennessee. www.YLC.org.