



**SOUTHERN JUVENILE DEFENDER CENTER
COVID-19 PANDEMIC POLICY STATEMENT**

The Southern Juvenile Defender Center (SJDC), encourages state, county, and municipal governments throughout the South to take immediate action against COVID-19 to protect young people in the juvenile delinquency system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread upheaval in unprecedented ways. All levels of government are taking action to protect our vulnerable populations and the public at large. Every day, new orders and recommendations are forthcoming throughout the South. Large segments of our population have been encouraged to “shelter in place”; schools and universities have closed or converted online classes only; businesses have been closed; gatherings of increasingly smaller numbers are prohibited; and air travel has virtually been grounded. We are all expected to practice “social distancing” and are encouraged stay home in order to “flatten the curve.”

Detained youth are at greater risk of contracting and exposing others to COVID-19 if they remain in detention. Young people are arrested and brought into detention facilities daily. Probation officers and facility staff enter and leave these institutions daily. Law enforcement, attorneys, community organizations, vendors, and others regularly visit these facilities.

At this time of great uncertainty, children in juvenile detention facilities must become a priority.

Young people in the juvenile justice system are especially vulnerable because they have little control over their situation and have specialized needs. Any local and statewide plans to mitigate the pandemic must include this population. Every one of these children is a part of a multigenerational household. Most, if not all, have experienced significant trauma. Most suffer from PTSD, depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, or other mental illnesses, or have intellectual or learning disabilities. They are also at a unique and sensitive time of emotional development. Detained youth experience COVID-19-related stress, fear, and anxiety, just as do adults, but without an adult's maturity and comprehension. Justice-involved children, like all of us, seek solace from those we love.

At its core, the juvenile justice system is about rehabilitation and public safety. In confronting the COVID-19 pandemic, the balance of interests must favor releasing young people from locked facilities, not detaining children during the crisis, and not instituting charges for minor offenses which can lead to detention in the future.

Many youth are being held for misdemeanors and non-violent felonies or for violating probation conditions. Others are awaiting an available bed at a facility. The majority of those placements are indefinitely not accepting new children. Youth who present little or limited public safety threat must be released immediately. For those who are not released, affirmative protective measures must be put

in place so that any detained youth's health, including mental health, is not compromised nor their due process rights violated.

Detention of youth where there are safe alternatives is inconsistent with the rehabilitative goals of the juvenile justice system and contrary to public health recommendations.

Sincerely Yours,



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