

Children and young people are housed in institutions throughout the state of Ohio either as a disposition for delinquency, abuse/neglect/dependency petition, or in order to access behavioral health treatment. This includes children confined in three state correctional facilities operated by the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS), the four contract facilities for DHS alternative placements, twelve (12) community correctional facilities, and 36 juvenile detention centers, as well as numerous shelters and residential facilities across the state.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses an urgent threat to the safety and well-being of all Ohioans, as indicated by Governor DeWine's declaration of a state of emergency on March 9, 2020 and subsequent stay at home order issued on March 22, 2020. **Prevention** through social distancing is currently the recommended course of action given that there is no known treatment or vaccine. Institutional settings, including youth prisons, detention centers, shelter care and residential facilities, where children and youth live in close quarters are particularly difficult spaces to ensure effective distancing, hygiene and sanitation.

There is no national child-specific guidance for addressing the needs of children housed in institutional facilities; however, there is some effort to apply existing guidance to this population. The Ohio DJFS has posted a [memorandum](#) from the U.S. Children's Bureau (<http://jfs.ohio.gov/ocomm/pdf/Childrens-Bureau-COVID-19.pdf>) which notes:

"While the CDC does not provide guidance specifically targeted to the types of child care institutions in which some children in foster care reside, it does provide (CDC) guidance for long-term care facilities that is of relevance to such placement types: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/home/index.html> "

Again, while no child-specific institutional guidance exists as of yet, the CDC does provide "Interim Guidance on Management of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Correctional and Detention Facilities" which may be considered in looking to the needs of confined children and young people (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/correction-detention/guidance-correctional-detention.html>). The following points are included in this CDC guidance which are especially relevant to children:

- Note that incarcerated/detained populations have higher prevalence of infectious and chronic diseases and are in poorer health than the general population, even at younger ages.
- Explore strategies to prevent over-crowding of correctional and detention facilities during a community outbreak.
- When possible, arrange lawful alternatives to in-person court appearances.
- Consider alternatives to existing group activities, in outdoor areas or other areas where individuals can spread out.
- Note that if group activities are discontinued, it will be important to identify alternative forms of activity to support the mental health of incarcerated/detained persons.
- Consider having healthcare staff perform rounds on a regular basis to answer questions about COVID-19.

[Child and adolescent experts](#) note that children are “more vulnerable to the emotional impact of traumatic events that disrupt their daily lives” and the critical importance of protecting children’s emotional well-being.

Physicians have expressed concern about the unique risks and vulnerabilities of incarcerated children during this pandemic ; on March 22, 2020, a community of doctors issued a [letter](#) calling for the release of youth from juvenile court facilities. In their letter, the Physicians for Criminal Justice Reform note:

“Because detained and incarcerated populations are at high risk to contract a virus like COVID-19, which spreads through respiratory droplets, we strongly urge governors, juvenile court systems, and state and local juvenile detention and correctional departments to address the ongoing global health pandemic by swiftly implementing the following recommendations:

- 1) Immediately release youth in detention and correctional facilities who can safely return to the home of their families and/or caretakers, with community-based supports and supervision, in order to alleviate potential exposure to COVID-19;**
- 2) Halt new admissions to detention and incarceration facilities to mitigate the harm from the COVID-19 pandemic; and**
- 3) Establish and share publicly a COVID-19 safety plan for all youth who remain in facilities to ensure they have proper access to cleaning and sanitation supplies, as well as resources, support, and contact with loved ones.”**

Advocacy [organizations in Ohio](#) and [nationally](#) have called for specific protections, with a primary focus on releasing young people who can safely be on community supervision rather than incarceration.

Our Center has been in regular contact with the Cuyahoga County juvenile detention center and the Ohio Department of Youth Services since the week of the Governor’s emergency declaration and has consistently called for the following, in addition to the general protective measures they had announced:

1. All staff in contact with children detained be regularly screened prior to youth contact to avoid potential transmission (as part of a comprehensive management plan that includes adequate personal protective equipment).
2. Ensure children detained have a free call to their parent/guardian (within the next 24-48 hours of the decision to discontinue visits), to help assuage their concerns and regularly thereafter. And that additional free calls be permitted throughout the week and not based on behavior, to help continue to address anxiety the youth may be experiencing. Regular communication with families and community partners is also essential.
3. Ensure children have educational and enrichment programming throughout their day, and especially social and emotional support, to address what may be heightened anxieties during this time. We also caution against overreliance on room seclusion, especially without some kind of access to reading materials etc., as isolation can exacerbate potential trauma and mental health issues. Related to this -- if there are community partners willing and able to consider offering or at least exploring remote programming (video, podcasts, etc.) – we would urge that this be considered by the local detention center. Regular, daily, visits by social workers and/or other qualified staff to support youth experiencing heightened emotional and mental distress is critical.

Moreover, given that prevention is the best course of action, safely reducing institutional population is paramount. Supporting [efforts to halt all unnecessary admissions](#) to local detention centers where reasonable alternatives exist and to safely release youth, particularly those detained for status and/or low-level offenses, on community supervision is key to reduce the likelihood of any potential increased risk of exposure to the COVID-19 due to the nature of being confined in an institution.