



COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

HOUSE OF DELEGATES
RICHMOND

CARRIE E. COYNER

13271 Rivers Bend Boulevard
CHESTER, VIRGINIA 23836
SEVENTY-FIFTH DISTRICT

COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS:
EDUCATION
GENERAL LAWS
APPROPRIATIONS
RULES

March 28, 2025

Amy Floriano
Director
Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice
600 East Main Street, 20th Floor
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Re: Dangerous and Unsafe Conditions at Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center

Dear Director Floriano:

I appreciate you taking my call regarding my concerns over the conditions at Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center. I am writing to you in my capacity as one of Chesterfield County's delegates to the Virginia General Assembly, and as the Vice-chair of the Virginia Commission on Youth. I am writing to both express my continued concerns about the current situation and to make specific requests for the Department of Juvenile Justice's presentation to the Commission on April 1st.

CONCERNS

- **Background**

As you know, some of Virginia's most troubled and complicated youth are held in state custody at Bon Air. In addition to having often engaged in serious and dangerous behavior themselves, they frequently have extensive histories of trauma exposure, substantial behavioral health challenges, substance abuse disorders, learning and other disabilities, and are years behind where they should be in school. When youth are committed to state custody (OUR custody) it is the Commonwealth's responsibility to not only keep them safe, but also to address these underlying issues and rehabilitate them. From all that I have learned, I fear that we are failing on both counts.

I should clarify that, in addition to following the all too regular news accounts about staffing shortages, fire-setting, and other troubling conditions at Bon Air, I had the recent opportunity to speak with two former Bon Air residents while visiting Chesterfield County jail. I have also received a letter from our local fire chief laying out his concerns about what is happening at Bon Air, and I have spoken with sheriff's staff who have interacted with the former Bon Air

residents. Below, please find some of my concerns given these conversations and what I have read:

- **Critically low, but unknown, staffing levels**

As has been well reported, the facility is severely understaffed. What is unknown at this point, however, is the true severity of the problem because DJJ is not publicly sharing information about staffing levels. While this is alarming on its own, the consequences of lack of staffing, especially when it comes to running a facility for youth who require education, treatment, and other rehabilitative programming, are severe and damaging.

I also understand that, because staffing levels are so low, DOC staff are being called in to make up for DJJ's deficits. I am concerned that DOC staff lack the same level of training required to work with youth, and that their presence at Bon Air may further exacerbate existing problems.

- **Lack of access to education, treatment, and other programming**

Based on conversations I had with the two young men, the lack of staffing limits the ability for youth to participate in school, treatment, recreation, or other rehabilitative programming. They reported some weeks only being able to go to school a couple of days a week, due to an inadequate number of staff, and, despite having been there for two years or more, making little progress educationally.

In sharp contrast, one of the young men described how now that he is at the jail he has been provided a real chance to complete his GED. It is very distressing to me that he is receiving more educational support at an adult jail than he was at a juvenile correctional center.

Likewise, in my conversation with them it also seems like there is a lack of access to treatment services. One of the young men described his struggles with the loss of loved ones to gun violence. At the same time, it was apparent that he had received little treatment support or help getting insight into his prior drug use and the pain and tragedy he had experienced.

Finally, it also seems that lack of staffing might be negatively impacting access to health care. One resident informed me that a child in a neighboring cell was having a seizure, and the residents' cries for help were only responded to once a therapist arrived in the area after much delay.

- **Impact of New Length of Stay Policies and Procedures**

One of the youth I met with explained how he has already exceeded his projected length of stay at Bon Air but had little understanding of why he was not released, beyond being told that it was the decision of the Superintendent.

As you know, the problems of low staffing levels get exacerbated by increased, or overcrowded, populations of youth. Holding youth beyond their release date can contribute to the challenging conditions for them, but also for all the young people and staff at Bon Air.

While I understand his characterization of his situation might not be accurate, I also understand that you have changed the length of stay policies and procedures in a manner likely to increase the population at Bon Air. I also know you did this at a time when staffing levels were already a concern. I think we need to better understand the impact of these new policies and procedures on the situation at Bon Air.

- **Extensive time in effective isolation harms behavioral health**

It is my understanding that the lack of staff, particularly through the weekend, can result in children being confined to their cells for several days at a time. One resident informed me that the kids know that starting on Fridays at 4-5pm, they will likely be locked in their cells until Monday due to insufficient staffing to let them out. This lack of staff has also resulted in limits on phone calls to family, showers, recreation time and other opportunities for positive interactions because the lack of staff limits how many young men can be out of their rooms at any one time. If true, these allegations suggest that DJJ is effectively subjecting most youth to isolation, or solitary confinement, on a weekly basis. For young people with behavioral health concerns, and prior trauma exposure, this kind of confinement and prolonged isolation is dangerous, harmful, and the opposite of rehabilitative.

In fact, both youth reported that this prolonged confinement incentivizes youth to act out by fighting, lighting fires or other activities, as it gets them out of their cells and compels interactions with others. They both acknowledged that this behavior was not appropriate, but that youth just lose it during the extended confinement.

I should add that despite both youth being held at Chesterfield and/or Riverside due to charges of assaulting and injuring staff at Bon Air, they behaved respectfully and appropriately with me. I felt safe the entire time. If we give them what they need in terms of rehabilitation and safe and humane treatment, I expect that we improve our chances of getting the same from them.

- **Increased rates of fire setting:**

According to our local fire chief, the number of annual incidents involving the response of CFMES has more than doubled from FY-2023 to the current year-to-date FY-2025. The Chief wrote a letter outlining the 134 Bon Air incidents CFEMS has responded to in the past five years to demonstrate the marked increase. The incidents not only endanger residents and staff, but also needlessly increase the risk for firefighters and Chesterfield residents. The current situation at Bon Air demands more time and resources from CFMES to address preventable fires, rendering them unavailable to respond to more serious incidents.

The Chief of CFEMS also highlighted that the toxic smoke from burning or smoldering synthetic materials presents acute physical risks and chronic health concerns to residents and staff.¹

And while he wrote the letter to highlight the increased calls and fire setting, the Chief highlighted: “[the] pattern of increasing malicious fires and damage to fire detection and

¹ Letter p 2

suppression systems at [Bon Air] is likely a symptom of much deeper issues at the facility that must be addressed by DJJS.”²

REQUESTS FOR COMMISSION MEETING

I believe that while staffing is a major challenge right now (for DJJ but also for other agencies like DOC) that focusing only on staffing will not solve the problem either. But the Commission on Youth cannot recommend or propose additional support unless it has an accurate and transparent understanding of the challenges that DJJ faces.

Accordingly, when you present to us on April 1, 2025 I respectfully request that you address the following questions. I understand they are numerous but also expect that they are the kinds of questions you are already asking yourselves as you attempt to address the current challenging situation.

1. What are the actual staffing levels at Bon Air? How have they changed over time?
2. Of Bon Air staff who are currently employed, how many are out on disability, under investigation, or on medical leave?
3. How many staff did DJJ hire for Bon Air in FY 23 and 24? How many employees resigned or were terminated during that time?
4. What are actual staff to resident ratios on a per unit basis for Bon Air? Please provide daily actual ratios for the last 24 months including a breakdown of DJJ staff and supplemental staff to meet the ratio (i.e. DOC assistance or volunteers)
5. How often does DJJ have single coverage on a unit?
6. What steps is DJJ taking to address staffing challenges?
7. What other support does DJJ need?
8. What is the current population at Bon Air, at CPP units, and of committed youth awaiting placement.
9. How has population changed over the last 24 months, and what are projections for the next 24 months?
10. What has the impact of change in length of stay policies been on population levels?
11. Who determines when and if youth will be released?
12. How often are youth isolated in their cells during the average day, and on the average weekend because of staffing levels?
13. How have staffing levels impacted all programming including access to outside recreation, treatment, and vocational training?
14. How many school days during the 24/25 academic year were youth unable to attend school in the school classrooms at Bon Air?

² Letter p2

15. What are the number of serious incidents for FY 23, 24 and to date? How have they changed over time? For this question also please provide specific data on incidents of attempted or actual self-harm, fire-setting, assault on staff, assault on other youth.
16. How is the Department responding to increased fire incidents?

I know that the Commission on Youth stands ready to assist the Department in its important work of public safety through rehabilitation which can only happen with a transparent and full accounting of the current situation. Without such accounting we cannot fulfill our responsibilities to the taxpayers of Virginia, the staff of DJJ, or the youth who are in state custody.

Sincerely,



Carrie E. Coyner
Virginia House of Delegates, 75th District
804-698-1075 (Capitol Office)