

Respectfully Submitted by Members of the  
Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and  
Juvenile Justice Reform

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**Blue Ribbon Commission on  
Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform  
in the District of Columbia**

**Anthony A. Williams, Mayor**

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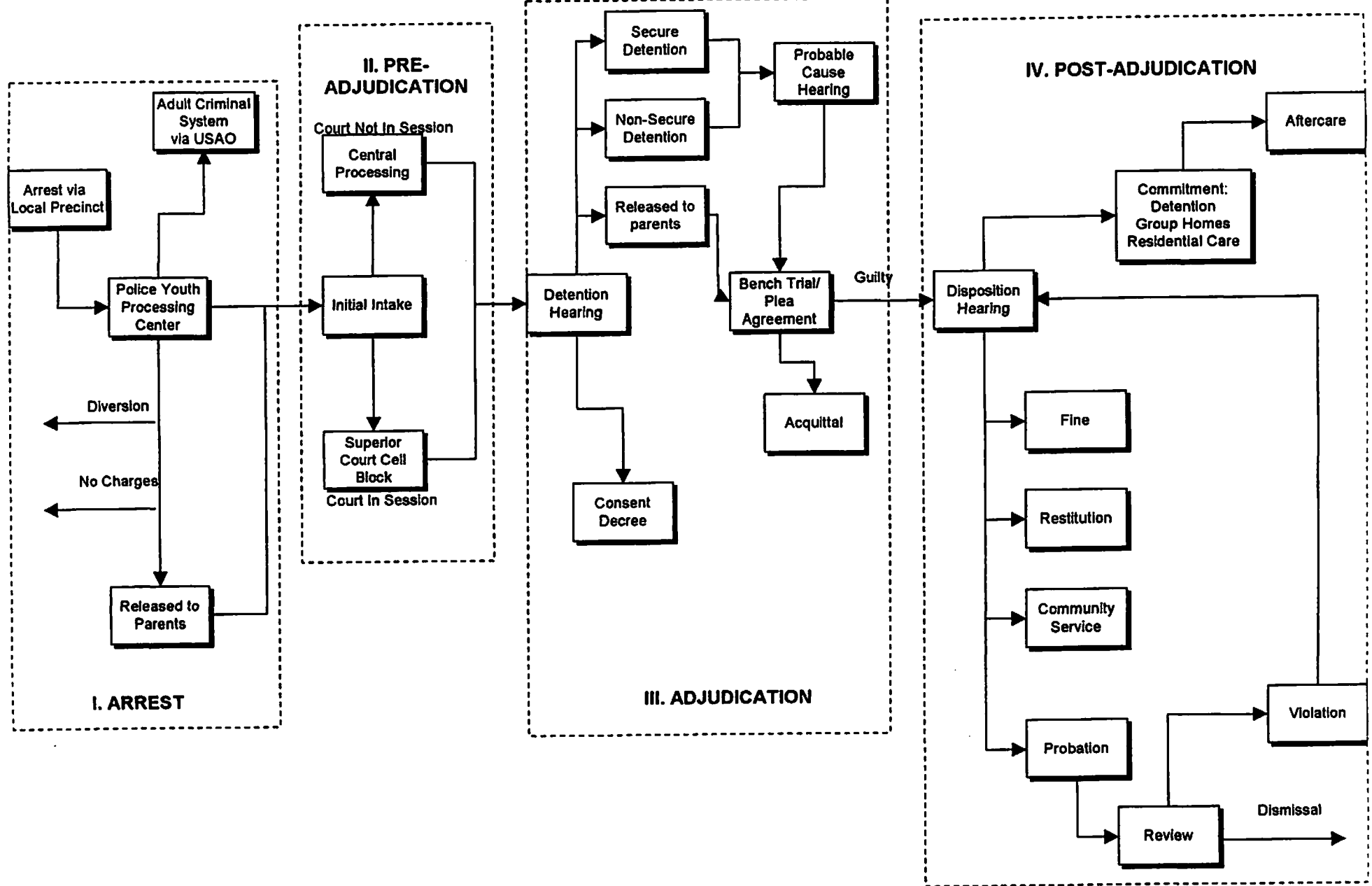
## **Introduction**

The District of Columbia Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform (hereafter referred to as "the Commission") was established by Mayor Anthony Williams on August 18, 2000, through Mayoral Order No. 2000-130 (See Appendix F). Commission members were charged with the responsibility to offer policy recommendations to address youth safety and the juvenile justice system. Major themes in the Commission's charge included: an assessment of youth crime prevention strategies and model programs; the identification of strengths and weaknesses in rehabilitative and supportive services and programs; an exploration of research related to the impact of youth violence and substance abuse among youth; an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of current institutional systems; and the development of strategies for serving children and youth in their communities and neighborhoods. In addition, Mayor Williams issued an explicit call for a vision and seamless network of youth service ideals that "treat children as children."

In addition to placing a premium on the design of a juvenile justice system which simultaneously treats children as children and guards public safety, Mayor Williams expressed a desire to identify best practices that could be integrated into the District of Columbia. This process was anchored by the interdisciplinary, interagency, and multi-sector background of the individuals who have served an important public service duty through their participation on this Commission (See Appendix A). Recognizing the need for collaborative research, policy, and program frameworks to address youth safety,

Figure 1

# JUVENILE PROCESSING IN THE DISTRICT'S CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM



Commission members from a range of professional backgrounds in the public and private sector were also united by their affirmation of the complexity of individual, family, community, and environmental factors that put children and youth at risk for crime and violence.

In order to achieve the mandate identified in *Mayoral Order No. 2000-130*, the Commission adopted the following objectives and strategies, so that it could solicit the most comprehensive input from a range of stakeholders:

- **Map juvenile crime and the structure of the juvenile justice system in the District of Columbia.** The Commission analyzed comprehensive reports, as well as primary and secondary data related to trends in juvenile crime. This included an exploration of information related to current institutional structures and services designed to address youth development in community-based contexts and schools, programming in the juvenile justice system, and legislative and administrative oversight of the juvenile justice system (See Figure 1). Information and data were gathered through formal research, workshops and conversations with policy experts and juvenile justice advocates and coalitions, and discussions and interviews with program directors and public officials. Public and community hearings and testimony also supplied important information about exposure of youth to risks for crime and violence and other contextual information needed to evaluate the effectiveness of current youth services (See Appendix C).

- **Identification of Best Practices and Model Programs.** Commission members engaged in discussions of identified best practices and model programs in the District of Columbia and other jurisdictions (See Appendix D). In addition to visits to youth programs across the District of Columbia, Commissioners conducted 7 (seven) site visits to other jurisdictions between May and August 2001. Best practices were also identified through input from an interactive Commission website, informal discussions with youth and youth advocates, juvenile justice scholars, and additional technical assistance from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Urban Institute, Georgetown University/Youth Law Center, New York University/Center for Child and Family Policy, Center on Criminal and Juvenile Justice, and the federal Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention, among other government, university, and community-based resources.
- **Identification of Strengths and Unmet Needs in Service Delivery.** Commission members asked questions about the scope and quality of existing youth services in order to identify strengths and gaps in programming. This process involved discussions with youth (including some whose lives were impacted by interactions with the juvenile justice system) and youth providers, community organizations and neighborhood groups, program directors working on child welfare in the public and private sectors, and colleagues from

neighboring jurisdictions (See Appendix E). The Commission also held two public hearings (March 31, 2001 and April 5, 2001) to gather information from the public at large.

Based on the benchmarks presented in the fifteen-year-old *Jerry M.* consent decree (See Appendix F) and themes uncovered from these hearings about the quality of youth programming and police/youth relations, the Commission decided to organize focus groups so that youth and youth providers could speak more personally and privately about their personal and professional experiences. Members of the faith community were also invited to participate in a roundtable to share their perceptions of youth needs and service delivery.

- **Development of Policy Recommendations and Final Report.** After identifying core areas of the continuum for youth development and programming in the juvenile justice system, Commission members organized themselves into subcommittees designed to research and recommend various policy alternatives. In addition to an *Executive Committee*, which coordinated cross-cutting themes, other subcommittees included: *Youth Development* (explored community-based strategies designed to create a seamless network of services for youth); *Programming* (examined existing and model programming in juvenile justice system); *Legislative* (analyzed legislative and administrative authority related to implementation of various strategies to deal with youth services and juvenile delinquency). A *Governance* subcommittee was subsequently formed to present a report in the context of a discussion of the challenges of the implementation

process and the feasibility of cultural and institutional change. Input for this process was gathered from advocates and colleagues in the District of Columbia and other jurisdictions, as well as through historical analysis of the juvenile justice system in the District of Columbia.

I cannot possibly present this report without mention of the fact that the Commission's work was deeply enriched by the dedication of many individuals. First, I must thank the Subcommittee Chairs- Governance (Charles Miller), Legislative (Sharon Styles-Anderson), Programming (Alex Escarcega), and Youth Development (Terri Lee Freeman)- who guided the Commission's work in many important ways. Second, we must acknowledge two individuals who endeavored to improve the lives of children and youth in the District of Columbia. Unfortunately, one of them, the late Charles F.C. Ruff, former Corporation Counsel for the District of Columbia, passed away last November. His resolve to improve the lives of children and youth- both inside and outside the juvenile justice system- lived on along with the voices of other Commissioners who shared his passion. The other individual is Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth, and Families, Carolyn Graham, who, in addition to her own personal energy, provided the Commission with the professional guidance of her entire staff in order to carry out the Mayor's Order.

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There is an old African American spiritual which speaks to the sanctity of life and the yearning to reach one's potential: "I got a right. I got a right. Lord, I got a right to the tree of life." I am reminded of these powerful words, as I end my tenure as Chair of this Commission. Nothing is more important than the expectation that our children and youth have access to the nurturance afforded by our city's "tree of life." The right to reach their full potential with family and community support. This report represents an effort to promote a more productive dialogue among all of us- youth, public officials, advocates, judges, probation workers, police, social workers and child welfare activists- about how we are meeting the challenge to ensure that children in the District of Columbia have the necessary support to live productive and safe lives into the twenty-first century.

Eugene N. Hamilton, Senior Judge, Superior Court of the District of Columbia and  
Chair, Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform



## **Executive Summary**

### ***Critical Questions***

The findings in the attached report from the District of Columbia Commission on Youth Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform derive from a comprehensive investigation of public and private youth services and opportunities, as well as an assessment of the juvenile justice system. During its critical analysis of public and private strategies that address youth safety and the juvenile justice system, the Commission has asked many questions: What array of supportive services and opportunities exist for children and youth in our communities? How can government – local, federal, and regional- better assist with the problems identified? What is the magnitude, impact, and severity of youth violence and crime? What is needed to prevent youth crime and violence? What is it like to enter the juvenile justice system, and how effective has the District of Columbia been in the rehabilitation of youth? And finally, how can community and government partners, including the police, courts, advocates, social workers, child welfare activists, and perhaps more importantly, youth themselves, come together to address these issues?

### ***Juvenile Justice "System"?***

Shortly after the community at-large began the yearlong dialogue with the Commission in September of 2000, it became obvious that "system" is a misnomer for the various programs and strategies that bear on the experiences of youth who are

detained and committed under the auspices of various juvenile justice related agencies. One of the chief reasons for the statement is the complexity brought about by the historical context, which created a problematic disjuncture between federal and local authority in the management of juvenile delinquency. This complexity and tension has been affirmed by all who have engaged in conversations with the Commission. While the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, a federal entity, has jurisdiction over the initial intake and processing of juveniles, the District of Columbia's local agencies have responsibility for pre-trial and post-adjudication placement of youth. Probation remains the province of the Superior Court through Court Social Services (CSS); aftercare is the responsibility of the local Youth Services Administration (YSA). In this context, the District of Columbia's juvenile justice system cannot be classified as a unified, single entity under the control and management of local government and public officials, as is the case in most other jurisdictions.

*Jerry M.*

The Commission's findings affirm the important role of multiple agencies and layers of government in the District of Columbia, at the same time that they recognize that a significant reconceptualization and restructuring of that relationship is needed if we are to ensure that children and youth are served well by all who touch their lives. Indeed, the fifteen (15) year old *Jerry M.* consent decree stands as an important marker of the effort to bring high quality care and rehabilitation to children and youth who are in secure detention and secure commitment. A Commission recommendation to close and

demolish the Oak Hill Youth Center in Laurel, Maryland is a testimony to a new vision of child and youth friendly programming in the context of a nurturing environment focused on rehabilitation and treatment. Even as some advocates highlight the aspects of this civil action as the preeminent subject bearing on the conversation about the District's juvenile justice system, the Commission affirms that the guidelines in this case and other criteria for the attainment of high quality programming and a continuum of care are needed to build a strong, accountable, and effective system. In this context, the Commission recommends that the Mayor take action to implement comprehensive strategies that seek compliance with *Jerry M.* within two years as part of a broader effort to operationalize new policies geared toward youth development.

The Commission has wrestled with the legacy of the unpleasant circumstances surrounding the *Jerry M.* lawsuit. It also envisions that the process to settle this action must now result in a new rallying cry to wrap our arms around our children. Words shared by the *Jerry M.* panel authors on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the case, in 1996, provide perhaps the best guidance for the path to reform in the District of Columbia. Along with a recommendation that Oak Hill be closed, the authors remarked that "the entire juvenile justice system must develop and maintain a sense of urgency to overcome the lingering inequities visited upon juveniles in the District of Columbia." Through what might have functioned as a call to arms, they continued: "The various stakeholders in the system (judges, probation, school officials, District officials, police, etc.) need to develop the capacity to accomplish systematic planning. In reality, no single agency or individual can by themselves accomplish the implementation of the Jerry M. Consent Decree."