

Committee on Education and Labor

April 21, 2010

2175 Rayburn Office Building

Testimony presented by:

John S. Solberg, M.S.

Executive Director, Rawhide Boys Ranch

New London, WI

*“Reforming the Juvenile Justice System to Improve
Children’s Lives and Public Safety,”*

Good morning Chairman Miller, Ranking Member

Kline, and Members of the Committee. As the Executive

Director of Rawhide Boys Ranch, a faith-based, licensed

residential care center in Wisconsin, I am honored to

present testimony about the front line impact our

organization is making to improve the lives and safety of

youth in the Juvenile Justice system. I am also prepared to

testify on my observations regarding the impact of funding priorities associated with the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) on Rawhide and on a state and national level through contacts with state and national juvenile justice providers through participation in state and national associations.

As the leader of a non-profit charged with the care of over 120 juvenile placements each year, a board member for the previous four years with the Wisconsin Association of Family and Children's Agencies, a previous public policy committee member for the Alliance for Children and Families and a participant in the Building Bridges Summit sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Services Administration (SAMHSA), I have gained insights into the benefits and challenges associated with the sometimes competing interests and goals of JJDPAs priorities. My hope is to provide you an insight as to what is happening in Wisconsin from a practitioner's perspective as well as the impact of policy on community-based services in relation to out-of-home care or what might be referred to as levels of sanction care in Wisconsin and nationally.

Rawhide Boys Ranch was founded by John and Jan Gillespie and Bart and Cherry Starr in 1965 as an alternative to corrections for youth. At that time the Gillespie's founded Rawhide with a passion for assisting

troubled young men by creating a stable caring home environment on 714 acres along the Wolf River. This location provided the experiential environment that responded to the needs of at-risk young men aged 12 to 17. That same year the Gillespie's were joined by Hall of Fame quarterback Bart Starr and his wife Cherry who shared in the belief that young men need the structure, discipline and love that came from house parents modeling effective life skills for youth that lacked a stable environment and needed help to get their lives back on the right track.

What started as one home serving 7 youth for periods up to 3 years has transformed into seven boys homes serving

over 120 youth each year in intensive short term programs ranging from 4 months in length to 1 year. Youth placed at Rawhide come from over 50 counties in Wisconsin through referrals from county juvenile courts and state secure facilities. They receive high quality, individualized education at our on grounds high school, Starr Academy. They are provided with work experience training in seven different vocations, including vehicle repair and evaluation, food service, grounds and landscaping, general office administration, to name a few. Youth are provided programs that are evidence based including the family learning model, community services opportunities, individual and group counseling, to name a few.

In turn this rich treatment environment has led to independently researched success rate of 77% for youth placed at Rawhide not reoffending when placed back in the community after being placed for at least one year. This was based on a study conducted by the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. (Appleton Post Crescent article, “Most Rawhide Alumni Go Straight, Peter Geniesse, 3/20/94) It was determined that the longer youth were in care the higher the success rate. Rawhide conducted its own independent study over a three year period concluded in 2003 by an independent psychologist who found youth assessed at entry, discharge and six months after discharge demonstrated sustained positive behavior at a rate of 73%.

(Rawhide Outcome Study, Clinical and Functional Effectiveness utilizing the Youth Outcome Questionnaire conducted by Dr. Frank Cummings, Ph.D., Psychologist)

I would direct my testimony next to JJDP A Formula Grant Allocation priorities for juvenile justice programs: Rawhide, as a residential facility has experienced the impact of priorities established by JJDP A for the funding of community-based alternatives to incarceration. Today placements at our institution no longer include status offenders and rarely, first or second time offenders but youth with a significant history of criminal contacts and often time significant emotional challenges requiring medication and treatment. A typical youth placed at

Rawhide 15 years earlier would not resemble the youth we receive today in terms of multiple psychological diagnosis and numerous documented offenses. This is in part due to a greater emphasis among communities to treat individuals through a growing continuum of community-based services that provide various treatment and family services in response to criminal contact. To our credit, Wisconsin is a leader nationally in achieving shorter lengths of stay for juveniles in out-of-home care. Wisconsin is also a leader in providing community-based services that respond to the needs of youth in the juvenile justice system most notably through Wraparound Milwaukee. However, the combination of shorter residential placement coupled with

more emotionally challenged youths and development of effective programs is creating greater financial challenges for residential providers.

While community based services are an important response to many youth with offenses, a growing challenge is the assessment and appropriate response to treatment for youth with criminological thinking. Due in part to limited resources at the state and local level, we experience youth that are coming to residential, out-of-home care at a time when they have exhausted all community resources and would have benefited from more intensive services provided in residential care at an earlier stage in their life.

Another concern that is clear from my experience is the lack of agreed upon outcomes to document success in all phases of care. As noted in What Works, Wisconsin – What Science Tells us about Cost-Effective Programs for Juvenile Delinquency Prevention published in June 2005, stated on page 4, “The need for proven, effective high quality prevention and intervention programs remains a high priority in Wisconsin and across the nation.

Unfortunately, the effectiveness of many current programs and practices remains unproven at best, while some are known to be ineffective or even harmful.” Later in the study it is noted that, “Unfortunately, while there has been a remarkable growth in the number of evidence-based

prevention programs, their adoption and use by practitioners lags far behind. In the field of juvenile justice, the percentage of programs that are evidence based may be even lower.”

As a result of funding priorities incorporated in the JJDPAs directed toward state and local governments and in part to private agencies there is also a growing tension among community-based providers and out-of-home care providers that threatens the capacity to provide adequate care in the future. Understandably communities with limited resources are resistant to choosing more expensive forms of care since much of juvenile justice is funded at the local level in Wisconsin. In turn, youth may stay much

longer in community-based services, when a more appropriate placement may be in a residential setting.

This growing tension between community-based providers and out-of-home care providers led to a national summit in 2006, called the Building Bridges Summit hosted by SAMHSA under the direction of Gary Blau, Ph.D. and Chief of Child, Adolescent and Family Branch, Center for Mental Health Services. This summit brought together residential and home and community-based service providers, family members, youth, national and state policy maker, system of care council members, tribal representatives and representatives of national associations related to children's mental health and residential care. The

purpose was to address the historical tensions between residential and community-based service providers and supports. As a participant, I was surprised at the strong beliefs among some community-based participants that residential services were no longer needed in light of community-based alternatives. This tension is somewhat driven by the competition for declining resources, a strong belief in a particular level of care and a lack of understanding and experience. I am pleased to report that this summit brought about a greater understanding and appreciation among participants for an appropriate continuum of services and the need to support the capacity communities have available to provide and a wide range of

services to protect the community and provide treatment to youth. The outcome of this summit was a joint resolution to Advance a Statement of Shared Core Principles.

(Appendix A)

Of particular concern to this Committee, in my opinion should be the related impact that JJDPA funding priorities directed to community-based services has on diminishing the capacity of states, who are losing money for out of home care or sanction care that result in the closure of licensed programs. Over the past 45 years of operation, Rawhide has experienced the direct impact of Federal policy related to juvenile justice. By way of example, I currently serve on a Commission appointed by the

Governor of Wisconsin that is charged with recommending the closure of one of two secure juvenile facilities in the state. Should this happen, Wisconsin could lose 50% of its' capacity to provide secure detention of juveniles.

While a 35% decrease in juveniles placed at Wisconsin juvenile facilities is worthy of note, the question remains if this trend will continue at a time when all programs offered to youth are experiencing diminished funding. In addition, licensed private non-profit programs are experiencing increased pressure to close or merge leading to lower capacity for varying levels of residential care.

The challenge for this committee is to recognize the funding priorities of JJDPA have contributed to tensions

among the continuum of care and may diminish and put at risk the necessary and capital intensive infrastructure throughout the nation in the form of out-of-home or sanction level care. In addition, I feel the lack of agreed upon measurable outcomes, at each level of care, remains a challenge to determine the most effective treatment for youth in the juvenile justice system.

Thank you for allowing me the honor of presenting my testimony this morning and the opportunity to provide you my insights as practitioner in the care of juveniles placed in our care. I commend you in your service to our nation's at-risk youth. I would be happy to entertain any questions of the committee.