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**Prepared Remarks of Stephen Matthew "Matt" Reed, Executive Director
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**For testimony before the United States House of Representatives Committee on
Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and
Secondary Education**

**"Providing Vulnerable Youth the Hope of a Brighter Future Through Juvenile Justice
Reform"**

February 15, 2017

Good Morning. Thank you, Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and all members of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

My name is Matt Reed and I currently serve as the Executive Director of YMCA Safe Place Services in Louisville KY. I have had the privilege to work with at-risk youth for over 20 years.

I am here today to highlight some of the successful strategies and programs we have developed at YMCA Safe Place Services. We know that critical work remains to further strengthen juvenile justice reform. Many of our programs at Safe Place provide judicial and law enforcement partners with effective and evidence-based alternatives that have tangible and measurable results in keeping kids out of the justice system.

Field Release

Since 2005, YMCA Safe Place Services has operated a **Juvenile Field Release** program. The Field Release program is a partnership with local law enforcement, the administrative office of courts, and the Louisville Metro Youth Detention Services. The goal of this program is to provide law enforcement a safe release option as an alternative to detention when they encounter a juvenile who has committed a misdemeanor or non-detainable criminal offense.

Since its full inception, approximately 1,900 juveniles have been served by Field Release, helping decrease overall youth detention numbers by 60%.



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However, the most significant impact of the Field Release program has been the number of youth who gain immediate access to in-house or community partner referrals. For example, 15% of our Field Release are youth placed directly in the YMCA's Shelter House, a walk-in residential program for 12-17-year-olds that provides immediate safety and support. Overall 76% of our Field Release youth leave our care with either in-house or community partner services in place; including specialized services, such as drug treatment, or mental health therapy and evaluation.

During the 2010 and 2011 school years, YMCA Safe Place Services also successfully operated a **Truancy Diversion** pilot project in response to the increasing number of youth missing more than ten days of school per year. The model program served approximately 40 youth per year. Most youth who entered the program had missed 75 or more days of school and were experiencing other challenges such as low academic achievement, substance abuse in the home, poverty, and unstable housing. Before funding was cut at the state level in 2012, this program cut truancy rates of our participants by 73% and successfully diverted 67 youth from commitment to state's custody.

In 2016, we received a Title II grant through the Kentucky Justice and Public Safety Cabinet. Funding for the grant was provided by the US Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention. This grant is supporting us in our launch of the **Opportunity Program**.

The **Opportunity Program** is designed to engage at-risk youth and first-time, non-serious offenders, ages 10 – 14 years, in programs that reduce their rate of entry into the juvenile justice system. It includes three service components:

1. A "Mock" Truancy Court for middle school youth.
2. An Early Elementary School Intervention component for children who have at least one parent incarcerated;
3. And Intensive Case Management services available throughout the 10-week program.

The results so far are very positive. 48 kids have been served so since launching in October. Of those, 46 have had no new involvement with juvenile court, and 65% have had no additional unexcused absences from school.



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Success Story

With permission, I'd like to conclude my remarks by sharing a success story that best captures the value of our community based programs. This is Cassidy's story.

Years before the staff and I met Cassidy, she had been introduced to a lifestyle that no 12-year-old should ever have to endure. First introduced to drugs at the age of 12, Cassidy lived in what is often known as a trap house—a haven for drug dealers and buyers—constantly streaming in and out at all hours. On days Cassidy actually attended school, this was her experience when she returned home: Cassidy would enter to find one drug dealer and their buyers propped up in the dining room, another group set up the kitchen, another in the living room. There were guns, pot, and powders of all different colors lining the tables in smoke filled rooms.... noises everywhere... but a mother that was nowhere to be found. Sometimes transactions even occurred in her bedroom... those were scary ... the worst for a 12-year-old girl.

Her mom supported her own drug habit by selling off their food stamps and belongings, sometimes doing even worse. This was Cassidy's life through middle school until the end of her freshmen year of high school in 2012. During middle school, Cassidy routinely missed 40-70 days a year, missing 92 days of school her freshmen year and failing all but one of her classes.

But then in the summer of 2012, her life would change. She was arrested for possession of a handgun and drug paraphernalia after these items were found in her bedroom following a drug raid. Her mom had refused to give up any of the dealers, choosing instead to pin it on Cassidy. She watched her daughter taken off in handcuffs.

Those charges were later straightened out. This moment would actually prove to be one of the biggest blessings in Cassidy's life. Cassidy came to our shelter program following court and stayed with us through the custody removal process, eventually going to live with her grandparents.

Cassidy had endured a great amount of trauma as a child and was now an angry 15-year-old. Her grandparents began to bring Cassidy back to us for Family Team Meetings. Case planning and goals were basic at first, but what was not basic—and started to become evident to Cassidy—was the commitment made by her new family and her truancy case manager at Safe Place, Ms. Linda.



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Home-visits, school visits, rides to counseling, you name it, Linda did it or found a way. She never, ever broke her word to Cassidy. With that consistency, Cassidy and Linda developed a very strong relationship. By the start of next school year, Cassidy committed herself to extra tutoring, counseling, drug classes, even performing community service at Safe Place.

In November of 2013, just a year and half after coming to us, Cassidy signed up to take the ACT. She embarrassingly explained it away to Linda, stating, "I really just want to see what the test is like. I know I'll never be able to get in to college."

Cassidy, technically still a high school sophomore, received her ACT results in December of 2013. She had scored a 24.

Cassidy received her high school diploma in August of 2014. She indeed went to college and is enrolled today at the University of Louisville. She maintains steady employment and recently has become a mom. She and her fiancé, also a student at UofL, plan to marry in the spring.

Again thank you Chairmen Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and all members of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education. The important continued reform work needed in our juvenile justice system is critical. Your diligence and dedication to kids across our country is greatly appreciated.

Thank you.

***YMCA Safe Place Services** is a branch of the YMCA of Greater Louisville that is committed to making communities stronger by providing help, hope and healing to teens and families in crisis. With a focus on positive youth development, YMCA Safe Place Services seeks to strengthen families by breaking cycles of violence, abuse and turmoil and giving children and families the resources they need for a better future. From youth mentoring and family mediation services to street outreach initiatives and trauma-informed care, YMCA Safe Place Services is redefining how its communities address the needs of youth who are at risk of running away, becoming homeless or engaging with the justice system.*



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