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**Board of Supervisors Makes
Deeper Commitment to Youth Diversion**

In a move that could lead to a fundamental change in juvenile justice practices, the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to look into dramatically expanding diversion programs for youth.

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, principal author of the motion, noted that shifting the juvenile justice system's focus from punishment to mentoring, healing, restorative justice and similar techniques produces better outcomes for youth, while also saving taxpayer money. He noted the cost of keeping a teenager in a probation camp for year has risen to \$247,000, and added that any involvement in the juvenile justice system increases a youth's risk of dropping out of high school, becoming unemployed, and ending up homeless.

"This motion is centered on figuring out what works when it comes to serving and diverting youth, and then expanding and investing in those proven strategies," Supervisor Ridley-Thomas said.

Supervisor Janice Hahn, the motion's co-author, added, "All of our stakeholders recognize the need to devote resources to keeping kids out of jail and the importance of celebrating the potential of every child, devoid of any stigma that law enforcement contact may bring."

Youth of color are disproportionately impacted at all stages of Los Angeles County's juvenile justice system, and represent 95 percent of youth in probation camps and juvenile halls.

At present, diversion programs are unevenly spread out, vary widely in approach, and have limited funding. Supervisor Ridley-Thomas and Hahn's motion calls for crafting a comprehensive, coordinated and expanded system countywide that also addresses racial disparities in access to diversion opportunities. It drew wide support from both County leaders and community stakeholders, many of whom testified before the Board over the course of an hour and half in favor of the motion.

"We're in full support of the motion because it further gives us the opportunity to keep children out of the justice system or to minimize their involvement in it," newly hired Chief Deputy Probation Officer Sheila Mitchell said. "Children that don't pose a risk to public safety need not be in the juvenile justice system."

"It is important to keep children out of the court system, out of custody, and out of the juvenile justice system entirely," Acting Public Defender Kelly Emling said. "The stigma alone of being attached to a court case, or being attached to probation, is a very deep stigma for a child (but) outcomes have been shown to improve with any type of diversion effort."

Cheryl Bonacci, program director for the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, said the current punitive approach has not been effective. "I've sat with too many 12- and 13-year olds who don't belong in juvenile hall, and who would've benefited a lot more from a restorative pathway than punishment without proper support and guidance," she said. "I've seen too many teenagers who've been locked up over and over, and moved around the probation camp system without success, only to end up in adult court at the age of 16 on a case that has them set to be thrown away."

Dr. Robert Ross, President and CEO of The California Endowment, explained that many youths' problematic behavior can often be traced to childhood trauma, such as physical and sexual abuse, witnessing family or community violence, emotional neglect, separation from parents and caregivers due to incarceration or deportation, and other factors. He added that when immature brains are traumatized, the ability to make rational decisions is impaired.

"We have criminalized too much of what ails young people across this country," Dr. Ross said. "We must prioritize ways of helping to hold them accountable while keeping them out of the justice system."

"There's no question that young people need to be held responsible for their actions, but in a way that's supportive," Dr. Ross added. "Punishment and incarceration are not the only ways."

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