*Welcome to LLA Reports, a podcast produced by the Louisiana Legislative Auditor’s office. This podcast is intended to be an oral representation of the written report it highlights and is primarily for the use of the Louisiana Legislature.*

This is Kristen Jacobs. I’m a senior auditor with LLA’s Performance Audit Services. This episode of LLA Reports focuses on our new report titled “Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Secure Care Facilities.”

The purpose of this audit was to evaluate how the Office of Juvenile Justice – or OJJ – has handled the pandemic in the youth facilities it oversees.

Overall, we found OJJ faced multiple issues and challenges in addressing the pandemic.

The agency’s protocols generally complied with guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – or CDC – for medical isolation, screening, visitation, personal protective equipment, and social distancing.

However, OJJ officials were unable to verify whether their facilities consistently followed the protocols because onsite visits and quality assurance audits were suspended between March and September 2020.

In addition, we found OJJ was not always able to test all individuals who had close contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19. Many of the youth in OJJ’s care refused to be tested until the agency was able to obtain the less invasive, rapid tests for COVID-19 in December 2020.

As a result, OJJ quarantined all youth who had been in close contact with someone positive for COVID-19 instead of testing them. This increased the risk that a positive, but asymptomatic, youth could spread the virus to the rest of the dorm and staff.

We also found OJJ did not follow CDC guidance to limit transfers of youth between facilities during the pandemic. Records showed transfers increased 237 percent, from 59 between March and September 2019 to 199 between March and September 2020.

Of the transfers in 2020, 104 – or 52 percent – were transfers to place youth in behavioral intervention, which is a form of room confinement. Routinely placing youth in room confinement is not in line with juvenile justice best practices.

We found as well that COVID-19 presented challenges for OJJ in providing services to youth after contact between dorms was restricted, and visitors were not allowed into the facilities. OJJ did provide some treatment services, such as counseling sessions, but not as much as before the pandemic.

OJJ also halted in-person visitation and youth furloughs. This meant family engagement was limited and made rehabilitation and re-entry into society more challenging for the youth in these facilities.

Before COVID-19, OJJ had ongoing staffing challenges, but we found these were exacerbated by the pandemic. High turnover among staff and staff members taking leave resulted in OJJ struggling to meet federal standards for staff to youth ratios in its facilities.

As a result of our audit, we developed five recommendations. They included recommendations that OJJ develop a centralized document that details all of its pandemic protocols and a process to verify its facilities are following the protocols.

We also recommended OJJ ensure it follows the CDC’s testing protocols during a pandemic, and limit transfers between secure care facilities.

In addition, we recommendedOJJ limit the use of room confinement as recommended by juvenile justice best practices.

In its response to our report, which is detailed in the report’s appendix, OJJ agreed with all of our recommendations.

*We hope you found this podcast informative, and that you’ll follow future episodes of LLA Reports. You can subscribe to LLA Reports at Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or your favorite podcast platform.*

*This podcast was created as a part of the audit report just discussed and is intended primarily for the use of the Louisiana Legislature. The full report and the podcast can be found on the LLA’s website at* [*www.lla.la.gov*](http://www.lla.la.gov)*.*

*Thank you for listening.*