November presents a time for reflection as it marks the 37th anniversary of the Ohio Department of Youth Services. It’s hard to believe that I have served as Director for nearly 8 of these years. With all the progress we’ve made together, it’s a fitting time to look back at some of our major milestones. Come with me on a journey through time as we look back on some of our best work from the last 8 years.

First to Receive Barbara-Allen Hagen Award Twice: Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility was the first facility in the nation to receive the Barbara-Allen Hagan Award twice (2012 and 2015). This award from the Performance-based Standards (PbS) Learning Institute is given for excellence in youth care by developing and implementing strategic plans that result in positive outcomes for youth, staff, and families.

Engaging Family Members: Involving families throughout a youth’s stay supports more positive outcomes. Treatment interventions that actively engage youth and their families are known to be more effective. Today, we offer visitation opportunities to family members 7-days-a-week as well as a free, monthly bus service to make it easier for parents and guardians to see their youth, supporting family ties and habilitation. Since the inception of free bus trips in 2012, the agency has provided a total of 442 trips that served 4,084 family members.
Supporting Community Programs to Rehabilitate Youth Locally When Possible: Enhanced the continuum of programs and interventions to serve youth closer to their families and in the least restrictive setting. The intensity of treatment and community supervision is matched with a youth’s risk to reoffend. As a result, the DYS average daily population has decreased from 730 youth in 2011 to an average of 519 today.

Providing Reliable Conditions for Helping Youth Change Their Lives: When the SH Settlement Agreement was reached in 2008, facilities were crowded, options for serving youth were limited, and treatment was inconsistent. The solution included widespread reform efforts that impacted every aspect of the department, including youth assessment and placement, community options, treatment within the facilities, processes for release and reentry, and parole supervision. With termination of court monitoring in December 2015, these substantial improvements were confirmed as we committed to build upon our progress to help youth transform their lives and ultimately make a safer Ohio.

Holding Youth Accountable while Ensuring Consistency and Fairness: In order to more effectively serve a higher concentration of the youth with the most challenging needs, a new behavior management system called PRIDE (Positive Response Incentive Driven Environment) was instituted. The new approach raises the bar for how youth behave in the facilities as well as expectations for participation in education, treatment, and programming. This level system incentivizes youths’ personal responsibility and self-management to promote safe, positive facility environments.

Boosting Education and Employment: Over the last couple of years, the agency has sharpened its focus on providing youth with the academic and technical skills, knowledge and training necessary to succeed in future careers. DYS has boosted opportunities for youth to hold jobs within the facilities, providing the chance to save for reentry needs and gain work experience. We have also expanded options for youth to gain industry-recognized certificates, preparing them for in-demand jobs and careers.

Preparing Youth for More Productive Futures: Without creating any new positions, the agency formed a Bureau of Community Engagement and Reentry in September 2017 to make preparing and planning for youth transitioning back to their home communities a higher priority. The team serves as key contacts for employment, mentorship, and community service opportunities for youth. Efforts are becoming increasingly collaborative, thanks to active partnerships with employers, nonprofits, and a range of local resources.

Delivering Cost Savings to Taxpayers: Because of the strong continuum of community options that encourage and reinforce the diversion of appropriate youth, the agency reduced the overall budget by $58.6 million ($286.7 million in FY 2011 to $228.1 million in FY 2018). In an evaluation by the University of Cincinnati, community-based alternatives were found to be not only more cost-effective, but also more successful in helping youth.
Creating Strong Partnerships: The Department of Youth Services and the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction took significant steps in 2017 and 2018 to share non-core, back-office administrative functions that can help drive efficiencies and direct more money to their separate and distinct core missions.

We've only just touched the surface on our progress over the last 8 years, but I wanted to pause and thank you for being a part of our work to help youth improve their lives. Join me in celebrating what we have achieved for youth, families, and communities and believing in the good that is ahead!