

Advocates: Close empty N.Y. detention facilities

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ALBANY-- Juvenile-justice advocates Wednesday accused the state of shortchanging taxpayers by continuing to fund empty detention centers instead of spending money on more effective alternatives to jailing.

The Brace Residential Center in Delaware County houses only three children but maintains staff for the intended maximum capacity of 25 children, according to the coalition. Likewise, the Auburn Residential Center in Cayuga County is stiff staffed even though one of its 24 beds are occupied.

Maintaining these facilities is costing taxpayers between \$140,000 and \$200,000 a year per empty bed, Mishi Faruqee of the Correctional Association, a prisoner-advocacy group.

The Brace facility has about 30 employees maintaining the three children there, while the Auburn facility has about 25 employees with no children, Faruqee said.

The money that is being wasted maintaining the detention centers should be used to fund alternative, more effective community-based rehabilitation programs, advocates said.

"These facilities are ineffective, 80 percent of the residents are rearrested within three years," Faruqee said.

There are about 2,000 children in the juvenile-justice system, with most of them between the ages of 12 and 18, according to the state Office of Children and Family Services.

Studies have shown that delinquent children are better served by rehabilitation programs in their home communities that work with the offender's whole family, said Ruben Austria of another advocacy group, the Soros Justice Advocacy.

There are many community-based programs across the state, and cost on average \$25,000 per child per year compared to the \$150,000 it costs to house a child at a juvenile detention center, Austria said.

"All of these programs have achieved recidivism rates of 8 percent, 17 percent," compared to the 80 percent recidivism rates of juvenile detention centers, he said.

"The research has been done, the models have been done, that's why these facilities are empty," he said.

A January report from the state Office of Children and Family Services also supports community-based rehabilitation that provide children with education, job training, substance abuse counseling and family counseling.

Assembly Children and Families Committee Chairman William Scarborough, D-Queens, said he supports the closing of the centers to help close the \$4.6 billion budget deficit.

While closing juvenile-detention centers to balance the budget, the state can "use the opportunity to begin preventative programs" to keep kids out of jail, he said.

Both Gov. David Paterson's budget proposal and the Assembly budget plan seek to close the Brace and Auburn centers along with four other facilities across the state at a projected savings of \$16 million.

Despite the empty beds, the state Senate is fighting to keep the empty facilities open.

Sen. John Bonacic, R-Middletown, Orange County, whose district includes the Brace Facility, said "I have visited the Brace facility and good work is being done there."

"Our obligations are to ensure that our communities are safe and that the young people in custody have the best chance not to re-offend," he said. "I believe Brace accomplishes both goals."

The Office of Children and Families should have consulted with lawmakers before attempting to close the facilities, said Sen. Michael Nozzolio, R-Fayette, Seneca County, whose district includes Auburn.

"At the end of the day there may be closures," he said, adding that the Senate first wants to see a plan for re-use of the facilities.