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Editorial

New Day, Line by Budget Line

Moving beyond the steamy executive headlines, the New York Statehouse had better show taxpayers something more promising than business as usual as it tackles the deficit-threatened state budget. One quick test, buried in the fine print, would strike a blow for both juvenile justice and budget savings by shutting six of the state's 31 residential detention centers for juveniles.

Studies show such centers — which warehouse largely nonviolent offenders far from their families — are counterproductive and prohibitively costly. Center alumni have higher rates of recidivism compared with those placed in alternative programs in their home communities.

What should be a budgetary no-brainer, however, is already being undermined by the Senate Republicans. In an obvious move to protect upstate jobs for local constituents, they are insisting on keeping open three of the expendable and virtually unused centers. One of the centers the Senate would spare would be staffed even though there are no youths residing there in its 24 slots. Each empty bed costs taxpayers more than \$140,000 annually to maintain. A second has 25 beds and three residents, while the third has 11 children for its 25 beds.

The millions that would be wasted in this proposed shell game present a small but revealing indicator of whether Gov. David Paterson can live up to his inaugural promise to end the turf struggles and get something better from government.

There are far larger budget fights looming, dollarwise. But here is a worthy chance for Governor Paterson to show business as usual will not always trump justice and economic sense in a supposedly chastened Albany.