

Auburn juvenile facility may stay open

By Kathleen Barran / The Citizen
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Planned closings and reductions at seven non-secure state juvenile facilities as part of the proposed executive budget may be reversed now that the state Legislature has its turn to finalize the state spending plan.

The Senate advanced legislation to restore funding to juvenile residential centers in its budget Wednesday afternoon. It also prohibited the closure and transfer of any youth or employees at the Auburn and Brace (Delaware County) residential centers, non-secure facilities, as well as Great Valley (Cattaraugus County) Residential Center, which would be converted to a limited secure facility.

This proposal opposes the governor's budget, which called for closing six state juvenile residential centers, reducing the number of beds in a seventh, and saving \$16 million spent on empty beds. The state Office of Children and Family Services had said those funds could be applied to community-based alternatives.

"We would have preferred that they restored funding with all the facilities," said Darcy Wells, public relations officer for the New York State Public Employees' Federation.

Adirondack and Gloversville remain scheduled for closure, while Lansing will still be cut back from 100 beds to 50.

The proposed Senate legislation also extended the closure notification period from 12 months to 24 and required the OCFS to have an adaptive reuse plan ready when it notifies a facility slated to close.

"We support the two-year notice," Wells said. "It would give everyone more time to look at the options."

She also applauded the Senate's proposal to require the OCFS to study the juvenile justice system's effectiveness by looking at recidivism rates in residential and community based programs. The Senate would provide \$100,000 for this study.

The Assembly, which supported the closures, also voted on its budget Wednesday.

"Committees will meet tomorrow (Thursday)," Wells said, "and real negotiations will take place next week. The OCFS didn't consult with us ahead of time, so we started lobbying the Legislature, advertising and educating legislators."

She said the PEF would continue its efforts to keep the newly proposed legislation in the budget.

Now the two houses will hammer out any changes in the proposed budgets until they

come up with a final budget, by the April 1 deadline.

Cort Ruddy, aide to State Sen. David Valesky, D-Oneida, said that Valesky has gone on the record saying the centers should close.

"The Republicans are responsible for this (Senate) proposed budget," Ruddy said.

State Sen. Michael Nozzolio, R-Fayette, said the youth detention center legislation was a way of negotiating a comprehensive plan for the OCFS to put into place. He said he was hopeful that the Senate Republicans would move the budget forward.

"It's still being negotiated," he said. "No comprehensive plan was proposed prior to the closures. If closures are needed, how, in what manner, and what process should take place?" he asked.

He said the plan should address the entire state rather than what he described as a "patchwork" and "piecemeal" approach to the issue of juvenile detention centers.

"They (OCFS) did this without a comprehensive plan, not just to Auburn but across the state without rhyme or reason," Nozzolio said. "The Senate is trying to come up with a comprehensive plan that doesn't just cherry pick the system. It was done with a meat axe approach. It was not communicated to the workers or the legislators. The department has to come forward and explain how and why the change will provide better service."

"That's absolutely untrue," said Edward Borges, OCFS director of communications. "This is part of an ongoing transformation. This is just the latest reduction by moving out of a program that cost a lot of money into a program that is more cost effective."

Borges said the OCFS provided detailed briefings on the philosophy and the closings as well as updates on the entire process.

A fact sheet on the closings and reductions had been posted on the OCFS website since the Jan. 11 announcement, indicating a process that had begun in 2002 and the rationale behind the changes.

The Auburn Residential Center, a non-secure facility on Pine Ridge Road for girls from 13 to 17 years old, was informed on Jan. 11, that it would be closed on Jan. 11, 2009, along with five other facilities. The facility only had two residents in March, and they were expected to go home on Wednesday, although director Peter Amankwaah could not be reached to verify that they had left.

The 24-bed facility employs a staff of 25 who will continue to receive their salaries and benefits until the January 2009 deadline.

The center got caught up in a push by the PEF, a union representing 58,000 professional, scientific, and technical employees, whose publicity campaign placed advertising in newspapers and a letter on its website to be sent to legislators to reverse the closings.

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