

Legislators seek to keep detention centers open

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At least six state juvenile justice centers sit vacant or vastly underused, but New York state legislators want to keep them open anyway.

Against the wishes of those who run the facilities, members of first the Senate and now the Assembly have included funding in their budgets to keep all or some of the centers open for delinquent teens.

Lawmakers said they aren't necessarily committed to saving the centers, but they do want more questions answered.

"The main concern is to determine what the census is: How many people are there out there that will need facilities of this type? Is there overcrowding or can we find an alternate use for these facilities?" said Assemblyman Gary Finch, R-Springport, who represents parts of Cayuga County.

One of the centers slated for closure is Auburn Residential Center, a 24-bed, 25-staff facility currently empty.

Sen. John DeFrancisco, R-Syracuse, wants answers to more sinister accusations.

"We're trying to get statistics as to why all of a sudden they lost their entire populations," DeFrancisco said Friday. "Last year, they were filled. It seems like it was a planned failure."

The senators didn't include in their budget how much they estimate it will cost to keep the facilities open, but the price tag would be in the millions. The Assembly suggested restoring \$35 million in state funding to keep the centers running.

Whether lawmakers will get their wish remains to be seen. Legislators will negotiate the budget in the coming weeks, with the hopes of coming to an agreement by their April 1 deadline.

"These budgets are just opening conversations," said Assemblyman Brian Kolb, R-Canandaigua. "The real budget will be negotiated in the next couple of weeks."

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