

Juvenile Injustice:

Locking children up -- or funding empty centers -- makes no sense

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EDITORIAL

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Gladys Carrion, state commissioner of the Office of Children and Family Services, is on a mission -- one that puts her at odds with some law enforcement groups, unions and state lawmakers.

Yet the basic belief that drives her passion to reform the state juvenile justice system -- that the majority of children confined to detention centers don't belong there -- is humane and right.

Carrion, who recently met with The Post-Standard editorial board, says there are 2,000 children between the ages of 12 and 18 in state juvenile facilities that are akin to prisons. Some are as young as 10 years old.

Eight-six percent are African American or Latino, and 95 percent of that group are from New York City. The majority of the kids in non-secure or limited security facilities have committed misdemeanors. Most have mental health problems, learning disabilities or substance or alcohol addiction. Eighty percent return to a center within three years of release.

Carrion argues persuasively that these children (and their families) need community-based mental health, education and substance abuse services, not incarceration. She has proposed a fundamental shift in the juvenile justice model. She wants to begin by closing the most underutilized non-secure or minimally secure centers and using the savings -- about \$16 million -- to support community-based interventions.

Her plan makes sense. Why keep centers open like the 24-bed facility in Auburn, profiled in



Stephen D. Cannerelli/Staff photographer

AL CLARKE teaches science to the two remaining residents at Auburn Residential Center earlier this month. Now even those two residents are gone.

last Sunday's Post-Standard? At that time, it had just two juvenile girls and 25 staff members. Today it has no residents. The state estimates that it costs \$200,000 per bed to keep juveniles in centers, compared to about \$20,000 per child to provide community-based services. Carrion's office says it would cost about \$4.8 million a year to keep the Auburn facility open.

Under Carrion's plan, the state could accommodate all the kids who would still need to stay in detention centers -- the ones who have committed felonies, for example. And she pledges to find other work for the 217 state workers whose jobs would end.

Yet the plan is opposed by the New York State Public Employees' Federation. The state Senate also has put up a fierce fight -- going so far as to include language in its budget bill that essentially prevents Auburn and two other facilities from closing, and prohibiting centers from transferring residents or staff.

Sen. Michael Nozzolio, R-Fayette, says the closings must be justified and wonders if there are political motives behind the action. Sen. David Valesky, D-Oneida, said he supports the closings, but still supports the Senate budget bill because it contains so many other good provisions.

Some lawmakers and communities view the juvenile centers as economic development tools. Carrion says. At some facilities, the children shovel snow and do landscaping in the community, she says.

But children shouldn't be dehumanized as objects to fuel economic development, or banished to juvenile centers hundreds of miles from home when they could benefit from nearby services.

Carrion seems to have the children's needs at heart, while others appear to be looking out for the interests of adults, to the point that some state lawmakers may be willing to keep empty buildings open despite the state's \$4.4 billion deficit.

David Paterson, who will become governor Monday, should carefully review Carrion's initiatives -- as should every state lawmaker who truly cares about kids.