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Closing the door on juvenile facilities

EDITORIAL

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One of the fights that Governor David Paterson must gear up for is around the closing of under-used facilities for juvenile offenders.

In January, the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) announced a plan to close or merge several low-security juvenile detention facilities throughout the state. But members of the State Senate, some of who represent counties that depend on the jobs provided by these facilities, are digging in their heels.

The Senate wants to prohibit the closure or transfer of any youths or employees at three residential centers. And the New York State Public Employees Federation (PEF), which is opposed to all of the proposed closings or changes, claims that some facilities have empty beds not out of decreased need, but because OCFS has been shifting youths to private facilities. The Federation also points to an increase in arrests of youths in New York City.

But that reported increase hasn't necessarily translated into a larger population in custody—whether at state or privately-run facilities. That's because the city's Department of Juvenile Justice and advocates have been promoting alternatives to incarceration.

PEF is understandably concerned about the effects of OCFS's proposed changes on state employees and weak upstate economies. But kids can't be used as a crutch. The majority of young people going into these facilities are African American and Hispanic, and from New York City. And the shift in juvenile justice has been towards effective community-based services that can address what are often deeper family issues. That approach can only be applied locally, where parents and guardians are accessible.

OCFS has said that employees at closed facilities would be transferred to other sites. And Paterson has pledged to continue Eliot Spitzer's commitment to the economic revitalization of upstate. That is a real solution to upstate's economic woes—one that should factor out sending kids to far-away facilities.

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