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The Juveniles Are Gone, Yet the Jails Remain

ABOUT NEW YORK

By JIM DWYER

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The public pays about \$500 a night for each of the 25 beds in the Auburn Residential Center — a place for teenagers who have gotten into lower-grade trouble with the law, a junior-varsity jail. For the last two weeks, the beds in Auburn have been empty. And state officials expect them to remain empty, permanently.

But even with no one under the sheets, each bed will continue to cost as much as \$200,000 a year, the officials say.

Auburn, near Syracuse, is one of three state facilities for teenagers that are becoming high-priced ghost jails. Brace Residential Center, in Delaware County, with 25 beds, has just two teenagers staying there, watched over by a staff of 24; Great Valley in Cattaraugus County has 10 young people and a staff of 24. Soon, Brace and Great Valley, like Auburn, will no longer have teenagers staying there.

Yet if the State Senate has its way, all three will remain open until at least January 2010.

“I believe the number of juveniles was deliberately reduced this year and the kids sent elsewhere” to justify closing Great Valley, said State Senator Catharine M. Young, a Republican from Cattaraugus County, which is in the western part of the state, near the borders of Pennsylvania and Ohio. The Senate has passed a resolution that requires Great Valley and the others to remain open.

Nearly all politicians fight to keep jobs in their districts. Prisons, jails and juvenile facilities have been a source of political and economic power to upstate areas that have little other industry. Most of the inmates came from the five boroughs and the metropolitan area.

In the battle over the ghost jails, though, the fight is not simply about the local economy, but also about a system of juvenile corrections that has been in a quiet state of collapse for nearly a decade, particularly for teenagers who are not in trouble for serious offenses.

New York City has found better, cheaper ways to move teenagers onto safer ground, said Ronald E. Richter, the city’s family services coordinator.

For offenders whose home lives are filled with problems, the city now provides intense programs for the entire family, buttressing the role of adults in the lives of the teenagers. Last year, about 275 teenagers and their families were sent into these programs rather than the state juvenile system.

So instead of sending the teenagers off to state facilities that cost \$140,000 to \$200,000 a year per person, the city is spending about \$17,000 a year, Mr. Richter said. And while the state's juvenile recidivism rate is 80 percent, the city program had a rate of about 35 percent in its first year, he said.

Gladys Carrión, the commissioner of the state's Office of Children and Family Services, which administers the juvenile centers, says straightening out teenagers who have committed minor offenses is a job better done in community-based systems. The juvenile centers, she said, should be reserved for "young people who are a danger to themselves and their communities."

"For most of the kids, we don't need these facilities, and we don't need to be shipping them hundreds of miles away from their families," she said. "That money can be reinvested in programs that work better for these young people."

The prison economy is a central feature of New York's political economy. The state Public Employees Federation, which represents some of the employees in the juvenile centers, has bought advertisements in small newspapers in towns near the centers, arguing that the state is jumping the gun.

"We think it's premature," said Darcy Wells, spokeswoman for the union. "The police say that juvenile arrests are up by 8 percent in New York City."

Ms. Carrión said that there would be plenty of space if serious juvenile crime rose sharply. "Even after I close the facilities, I will have 20 to 30 percent excess capacity, so I have the flexibility in the system," she said.

Senator Young said that the community-based programs like the one in New York needed to be studied before the existing system was shut down. The current data, she said, is not adequate.

Ms. Carrión says there is no need to wait: The current juvenile system catapults needy youngsters far from the families they will eventually return to, with no changes in the households that they left.

"Almost all of the kids are black and brown," she said. "This is the alternative boarding school system for children of color. We can do better than this."