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OCFS wants to close underutilized youth facilities

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ALBANY, N.Y. -- "It was hard for me to transition back to the community when I was upstate," said Kyle Sullivan.

After being arrested at the age of 14 on a nonviolent charge, Kyle Sullivan said spending months in an upstate youth rehabilitation facility did little for him. He returned not once, but twice.

"We're here today to support the New York State Office of Children and Family Services' plan to close six underutilized youth facilities," said Juvenile Justice Project Director Mishi Faruquee.

Juvenile justice groups said Sullivan shares a common story that they said involves a system that for too long has been about filling beds and passing the high cost to taxpayers.

"The Senate has proposed keeping open the Auburn youth facility, the Brace youth facility, and the Great Valley youth facility," said Faruquee.

The Office of Children and Family Services planned to close six facilities to save taxpayers \$16 million. But to their surprise, three of the facilities are in the Senate budget to remain open - even though there are few or no children receiving services at the sites.

"We are in a fiscal situation where the state has to close a gap of between four and five billion," said Queens Assemblyman William Scarborough. "Meanwhile, the department has to maintain facilities when in some instances you have two children and 25 or 26 staff."

This, as OCFS hopes to move to a more targeted community-based program that costs \$15,000 per year, per kid - instead of using the facilities that can cost above \$100,000 per kid, per year.

Officials said the alternative programs are not only cheaper, but they believe they're more effective.

Ruben Austria, a Soros Justice Advocacy Fellow said, "You know what happens when we put young people upstate - 81 percent of the boys reoffend within three years."

A spokesman for the State Senate Majority told us why the facilities would remain open under their budget saying, "Three would be kept open for a number of factors, including economic factors, and we are trying to find alternative uses for the facilities."

"I think that's what we should do, find an alternative use in that community for that particular site or building," said OCFS Commissioner Gladys Carrion. "But really we don't need to have those facilities in our juvenile justice system."

Whatever happens, the lives of countless teens like Josh Lane will be affected. He attended a cheaper, alternative program instead of an upstate facility. He said, "Without that program, I probably would have been re-arrested. Locked up. Dead. Anything."

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