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Editorial

Better Protecting the Vulnerable

With time running out on the legislative clock, the State of New York is close to enacting three new laws that would set welcome national examples for criminal justice reform. Gov. Eliot Spitzer, the Assembly and the Senate need to work quickly to iron out any differences and ensure these vital reforms are signed into law.

The most important is the Safe Harbor Act, a groundbreaking initiative that would require the courts to treat sexually exploited children as victims in need of counseling, shelter and help rather than treating them as criminals. The goal is to give American children the same protections as foreign-born people who are smuggled into the United States to be used as sex slaves.

The Assembly version of the bill does just that. It also permits the courts to take into custody children who reject treatment and refuse to meet the conditions of the new law. Unfortunately, an 11th-hour change in the wording of the Senate version would allow individual judges to decide whether a sexually exploited child should be given shelter or be treated as a criminal. That defeats the whole purpose and needs to be dropped.

The Assembly and Senate have already passed a far-sighted bill that would outlaw disciplinary isolation for prison inmates with serious mental illness. Too often these prisoners end up harming themselves or attempting suicide. The bill also calls for expanded health care services for the mentally ill and improved training for corrections officers. Mr. Spitzer needs to sign this bill.

He also needs to sign another important bill that would end the state practice of declaring people ineligible for Medicaid once they land in prison. Inmates would still be barred from receiving Medicaid-funded services. But by remaining on the rolls, these inmates — many of whom are gravely ill — would be able to get access to Medicaid services promptly upon release. Under the previous arrangement, released inmates often remained without care for dangerously long periods of time.

The change would make a world of difference in the lives of newly released inmates who suffer from H.I.V. and AIDS, mental illness and other maladies that require prompt and continuous access to medication. Having gotten this close, Mr. Spitzer and legislative leaders need to ensure that these bills that would protect some of New York's most vulnerable residents become law.