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Editorial

## **A Better Chance**

Gov. David Paterson's juvenile justice task force was on the mark when it advised him to stop sending low-risk young offenders to faraway lockups and place more of them in lower-cost community-based programs.

These programs closely monitor and mentor troubled children with curfew checks, reviews of their school performance, and after-school activities. They have been shown to get low-risk young offenders back on track without institutionalizing them. Instead of taking that advice, the governor's budget virtually guts an already underfinanced effort intended to encourage localities to develop high-quality alternatives to detention programs.

Senator Velmanette Montgomery, Democrat of Brooklyn, is trying to fix that. She has introduced a bill that would require the state to begin reimbursing localities that keep children in effective local programs.

The current system encourages officials to do exactly the wrong thing. For example, the state reimburses localities for about 50 percent of the cost of operating centers for pretrial detention. And it pays 50 percent of the cost (which can go as high as \$200,000 per child per year) for incarcerating children sent to far-flung juvenile facilities. The state gives localities nothing when they place children in community-based programs that can cost as little as \$5,000 per year.

The Montgomery bill realigns state priorities. In addition to preserving about \$12 million to encourage more community-based programs, it would require the state to provide a 65 percent reimbursement for community-based, alternative-to-detention programs. This proposal has already been included in the Senate budget. The Assembly should embrace it and so should Governor Paterson. It makes good sense for the children and for New York's taxpayers.