

ANOTHER VOICE / STATE SPENDING

Why waste money on mostly empty juvenile facilities?

By Mishi Faruqee
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In January, New York State's Office of Children and Family Services announced the closing of six juvenile facilities because they are costly and ineffective. Yet State Sen. Catharine Young, R-Great Valley, and the New York State Senate leadership are fighting to keep these facilities open even though they are either mostly or completely empty.

In its proposed counter-budget released on March 12, the Senate included funding to keep three of these facilities open — Auburn Residential Center in Cayuga County, which has 24 beds and houses no children, Brace Residential Center in Delaware County, which has 25 beds and houses three children, and Great Valley Residential Center in Cattaraugus County, which has 25 beds and houses 11 children.

Each empty bed costs the state \$140,000 to \$200,000 per year, and the total cost to keep open these three facilities would come to more than \$4.2 million in the next fiscal year.

These facilities hold mainly non-violent juvenile offenders and are located hundreds of miles away from the children's families. They also do not work. The state's own research found that more than three-quarters of all kids who enter the state's juvenile justice system are rearrested within three years of their release.

With the cost savings from these closings, Children and Family Services can create a network of community-based programs as alternatives to incarceration. Studies have long demonstrated that the most successful juvenile programs are those that work with an entire family rather than only with an adjudicated youth, addressing the reasons why the children committed crimes in the first place. Extensive research has shown that these programs can lower the rearrest rates by 25 percent to 70 percent.

So why is the Senate willing to throw away taxpayer money to operate under-utilized and unsuccessful facilities?

The answer is a few dozen jobs. In order to lock in the jobs in these facilities, the Senate budget resolution prohibits the transfer of staff or children from the three facilities, proposes to mandate a two-year advance notification of any facility closure (it's now one year) and to convert the Great Valley center from a non-secure facility to a limited secure facility.

Last year, the Senate successfully restored funding for the Gloversville facility, although the facility has not housed any children since April 2006. The Senate now would like to pay the 24 staff members at the Auburn residential center to report every day to an empty facility that doesn't house any children.

Notably, when OCFS Commissioner Gladys Carrion announced the facility closures, she made a public commitment that her agency will work closely with the Department of Civil Services to ensure that all staff from the affected facilities will secure positions at other facilities or other state agencies.

Mishi Faruqee is director of the Juvenile Justice Project of the Correctional Association of New York.