



Justice and juveniles

As Governor Paterson races against the clock to get a new state budget in place, one issue he is sure to face is whether to see through former Governor Spitzer's plan to close some state juvenile detention facilities that house youths for long terms and place the full cost of maintaining short-term facilities on the shoulders of local governments.

While there is an argument to be made for closing the facilities, Governor Paterson should nonetheless improve upon it. That would better serve the interests of all, including taxpayers.

There's no question that some of the 28 facilities operated by the state Office of Children and Family Services are underused. That's why the office announced that it would close six of them. But the state Senate wants to keep three of the six open including Auburn Residential Center, which has 24 beds but at the moment houses no children; Brace Residential Center, with 25 beds and three children; and Great Valley Residential Center, with 25 beds and 11 children.

According to the Correctional Association's Juvenile Justice Project, a respected watchdog group that supports the closings, each empty bed costs taxpayers \$140,000 to \$200,000. The association argues that it would make better sense financially, and in terms of helping youngsters in trouble, if the six facilities were closed and the money used to establish a network of community-based programs.

That's a better approach, surely, but the state does not have a good record for community care. Remember when the state closed many of its mental hospitals and promised that patients would be cared for at community centers? That network never fully materialized, and many patients were left to search on their own for help. In some instances, patients turned to violence. Governor Paterson should support the closings, but with a firm guarantee that community care will be there.

The plan to shift costs to localities also seems reasonable on the surface. After all, the state has agreed to cap the local share of Medicaid costs that counties have traditionally borne, and a special state panel is looking at ways to cap property taxes. So, as a trade-off, the state would eliminate its share of the counties' cost for maintaining detention centers where youthful offenders are held as they wait to be placed in a state facility.

But even with the relief promised counties, shifting the full cost of short-term juvenile detention facilities could lead to local tax increases. In any case, as Albany County Executive Mike Breslin observes, it's the precedent that matters. If the cost shift takes place, then more might follow. Once again, the state would engage in a shell game of cutting, or stabilizing, taxes, by passing costs off to local governments. Mr. Paterson has an opportunity to end this shell game once and for all. He should seize the day.

THE ISSUE: Gov. Paterson faces a test of priorities on juvenile issues.

THE STAKES: He should set the right tone by breaking with the past.