

Senator Montgomery's Agenda to Save Young People's Lives

When a government program is obviously not working, it ought to be corrected. All too often, however, inertia and the threat of political fallout prevent public officials from making necessary changes.

New York State's juvenile justice system is a perfect case in point. The goal of the system is to rehabilitate children who commit serious offences. But the system does not work. About 80 percent of those who enter the system return to it or go to prison within three years after their initial release, a recidivism rate worse than adult prisoners nationally. Not much of a future.

Currently, there are about 2,000 children in the system, all under age 16 when they entered. Over 80 percent are African American or Latino youths; over 70 percent are from New York City. Since almost all the facilities are upstate, most of these children are housed hundreds of miles from their homes.

Every year the state spends \$350-\$400 million on upstate detention facilities. Many children housed in these facilities have mental health problems, learning disabilities, or substance or alcohol addictions. They should be getting support services from the state, and they should not be sentenced to juvenile residential facilities to get treatment that is otherwise not available in their communities. Historically, they are simply warehoused until they can be released without correcting their problems or providing them with programs and services that could help them succeed in the larger society. The next step for all too many of them is the state's prison system.

As it is currently operated, the juvenile justice system is expensive and inefficient. The state spends hundreds of millions of dollars annually to fund it and gets little for the money. The money currently spent on this system is contributing to the state's deficit at a time when budget cutting is inevitable.

Programs that actually support youth would cost a tiny fraction of the current system and would shrink the investment in prisons that wastes both taxpayer money and the lives and potential of all involved. This system has been broken for some time. Finally, something is being done to fix it.

Juvenile Justice Reforms

Brooklyn State Senator Velmanette Montgomery recently announced a legislative agenda to correct the system's many abuses. The Juvenile Justice Reform Agenda is a necessary cornerstone for restoring New York State to fiscal health. The agenda consists of nine pieces of legislation, four of which would be of upmost benefit to youth caught up in the system as well as to state finances.

Re-Direct New York (S6711-B) would provide funding to counties to create alternative programs to rehabilitate youth and keep them out of detention facilities. **Alternative to Residential Placement (S6709)** would require family court judges to sentence youth to community placement instead of detention facilities if appropriate and safe. And **Re-Invest New York (S6710-A/A10252)** would require that savings from the closing of state-operated juvenile facilities be reinvested in the Juvenile Justice Smart Investment Fund to support community-based services to help youth.

There is a political backlash to closing state-operated juvenile facilities that are often more than half empty. Closing facilities means lost jobs in a recession. The state will need to provide economic aid to upstate localities that are heavily dependent on jobs at facilities that should be closed.

Providing Skills Training

Perhaps most importantly, the **Educational Equality Training bill (S6713/A9805)** would establish a pilot program to provide job and vocational skills training to youthful offenders. This is a key provision if the juvenile rate of recidivism is to be reduced. There is no sense in warehousing juveniles for several years and then releasing them without any education or skills that would provide them with ways to succeed on the outside.

An effective juvenile justice system will not only contribute to public safety and save money. It could potentially save lives and help to create productive citizens. It will help to prevent many juveniles from graduating to the state's prisons where – given the dismal history of adult incarceration in this country - they stand a good chance of becoming career criminals.

Since many of the children in the juvenile justice system are black and Latino youths from New York City, a system that works will help the economic and social stability of the city's communities of color and the city overall. It will also strengthen the fabric of families where young offenders have made the transition to life back in their communities.

We commend Senator Montgomery for the political will to propose the Juvenile Justice Reform Agenda. The legislation that forms the agenda should be adopted by the state Legislature. The savings – in dollars and human lives – will be considerable.

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