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18 New details of TYC-TJPC merger emerge

By [Mike Ward](#) | Tuesday, March 8, 2011, 01:18 PM

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As a coalition of groups endorsed the proposed merger of Texas' two youth corrections agencies, new details emerged today on what the combined agency might look like if lawmakers approve the plan.

As much as \$150 million might be saved during the next two years by merging the Texas Youth Commission, which runs Texas' prison system for teenagers, and the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission, which supervises county-run probation programs for youthful offenders, officials said.

Under the proposal:

Community-based programs at secure facilities in urban areas would replace state-run lockups in remote parts of Texas.

Mental health and rehabilitation programs could be ramped up and better focused to address the needs of youths in communities, rather than in one statewide lockup.

The TYC lockups that are to be closed under the plan might be turned over to counties for use by local school districts or economic development or workforce agencies, and some might be turned into treatment centers for adult offenders.

One or two might be mothballed for future state use.

"Our current model is from the 1950s, when Texas was mostly an agricultural state and when our facilities were mostly in remote areas," said Senate Criminal Justice Committee Chairman John Whitmire, D-Houston, one of the authors of the merger bill, which was filed two weeks ago.

"We are an urban state. We need to change with the times."

Added a co-author, House Corrections Committee Chairman Jerry Madden, R-Richardson: "This plan provides us great opportunity to continue with the reforms we started four years ago, to allow us to better serve the youth and save taxpayers money."

As proposed in the bill filed in late February, the Texas Youth Commission and the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission would be abolished in favor of a new agency called the Texas Juvenile Justice Department that would oversee lockups for the most violent offenders and community-based probation, rehabilitation and treatment programs for the rest.

Such a move was earlier recommended 10-0 by the Sunset Advisory Commission, which conducts periodic reviews of state agencies and their operations.

Under the bill, the two agencies would begin merging next September and would have a year to complete the process. A special transition team of political appointees and probation and advocacy officials would be created to complete the merger, and a 13-member governing board would be created to manage the agency.

Under the bill, probation services would be prioritized over incarceration in a state lockup, and the independent ombudsman's office would continue to oversee the rights of youths in state-run lockups. Both Whitmire and Madden said no youthful offenders would be "let go" as a result of the merger.

At a Thursday news conference at the state Capitol, several criminal justice advocacy groups officially endorsed the merger.

Citing sweeping reforms that were made to Texas' juvenile justice system starting in 2007, Deborah Fowler, legal director of Texas Appleseed, said, "This is a chance for us to continue our success."

Marc Levin, director of the Center for Effective Justice at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said support among various groups has consolidated in recent months as the state's budget crisis has provided opportunity to improve Texas' system at less cost.

He noted that community-based programs have proven much cheaper to operate and are more effective than programs at remote, state-run lockups. Levin said several counties have decreased their commitments to TYC in the past two years and have found the results better and less costly.

"The reforms being considered this session give the state an opportunity to continue improving public safety and youth outcomes, while reducing overall spending," Levin said.

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