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EDITORIAL/COLUMNISTS

New day for Texas juvenile justice

Tuesday, May 10, 2011

Legislation that sunsets Texas' two juvenile justice agencies could bring a brighter future for the state's most troubled youths. The Sunset Commission has advised that the Legislature consolidate the Texas Youth Commission (TYC) and the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission (TJPC).

On April 13, the Senate passed Senate Bill 653 which implements the broad contours of the Sunset Commission's recommendation.

Now, Texas House of Representatives members must seize the opportunity to further strengthen this legislation by reallocating part of the savings, enhancing community-based programs and incorporating outcome-oriented performance measures to assess results.

The consolidation of the juvenile agencies should not be considered a public policy "experiment," but rather a continuation of proven reforms enacted in 2007 and 2009.

The principle behind those prior reforms – and the principle embodied in Sunset's consolidation recommendation – is that juvenile justice must shift its emphasis from incarceration to rehabilitation, emphasizing education, employment, and victims' restitution.

Studies have found that re-offending rates are lower when youths are kept in their communities, closer to their families and social supports such as schools and churches.

In most instances, non-residential programs including drug courts, victim-offender mediation, and probation supervision and treatment are most cost-effective.

For some of the most serious offenders, residential settings near major metropolitan areas from where most youth offenders come can both protect public safety and maintain contacts with the youth's family which is critical to successful reentry into society.

The results of moving towards community-based solutions for holding youths accountable speak for themselves.

Texas has half as many youth offenders in TYC lock-ups as it had in 2007, and the juvenile crime rate has dropped substantially since that time. Juvenile justice experts say that is largely because Texas policymakers wisely allocated half of the savings from shrinking TYC to strengthening community-based probation and treatment programs.

The reforms of 2007 and 2009 not only improved public safety, but they have resulted in approximately \$200 million in net savings.

Further savings are expected from consolidating the juvenile agencies; part of these savings will come from TYC closing several of its most geographically remote youth facilities and through administrative efficiencies, as the consolidation will mean a smaller combined bureaucracy at the state level.

Additional savings will come from combining TYC's parole offices in Texas cities with the juvenile probation department in that county.

The largest source of potential savings is through further downsizing remote state lockups while enhancing community-based options. And it is critical that part of the savings from downsizing follow the youths.

Currently it costs some \$359 per youth per day – more than \$120,000 per year – to keep youth offenders in TYC institutions. In contrast, county-run facilities cost \$170 per youth per day.

Small group homes, such as those that have achieved a remarkably low eight percent re-offending rate in Missouri, cost \$118 per youth per day.

To the extent additional youths are identified who can be safely supervised on probation in a non-residential setting, probation costs a mere \$14 per youth per day.

Of course, juvenile justice is about more than saving money. Public safety must always be prioritized. Missouri's success with small rehabilitative group homes in major urban areas is remarkable, as their re-offending rate is several times lower than the rate for TYC's remote lockups.

Partly because outcomes are better when youth's connections with their family and community are maintained and qualified treatment staff are also much easier to hire and retain in urban areas.

To ensure the new juvenile justice agency achieves its goals and remains transparent to victims, taxpayers, and other stakeholders, it is vital that strong performance measures focused on outcomes such as re-offense rate. victim

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restitution collection rate, and youth educational progress be incorporated into the sunset consolidation bill.

By further emphasizing community-based programs and accountability for performance, Texas lawmakers can continue the state's progress towards a more effective juvenile system that costs less, achieves better youth outcomes, and above all, improves public safety.

- Vikrant Reddy and Marc Levin

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