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MOLL: A fresh start for juvenile justice

December 07, 2011 6:00 AM

Jeanette Moll

December 1 is more than the beginning of a new month. It is the beginning of a new era for juvenile justice in Texas.

The 82nd Texas Legislature passed a bill that abolished the Texas Youth Commission (TYC), the agency responsible for juvenile incarceration, and the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission, responsible for county-level probation departments.

As of today, these agencies are merged to form the Texas Juvenile Justice Department. On the surface, today won't look much different to the juveniles under the supervision of the new department, to Texans driving past the facilities or administrative offices of the former agencies, or to taxpayers. However, there is much to be done and much at stake as the department begins its work to provide better outcomes for Texas juveniles.

The last four years in Texas have produced substantial changes in the juvenile justice system, and this new department will expand on those changes.

The department is statutorily charged with prioritizing community-based programs for juveniles, which are proven options for most youths, both less expensive and more effective than large, remotely located state-run lockups.

In addition, it will continue the practice of performance-based funding for counties, which reduces unnecessary incarceration and incentivizes the use of evidence-based, low-cost treatment alternatives administered by the counties to juvenile offenders who do not need to be incarcerated.

By breaking the cycle of criminality in more juveniles through proven initiatives, such as those treating substance abuse and those that work with families to strengthen discipline in the home, the new department can contribute to a safer future for all Texans.

Through the use of the state's recently adopted risk and needs assessment, space in local residential programs and state youth lockups can be better prioritized to protect public safety.

In fact, since Texas shifted its approach in the last five years to emphasize alternatives for appropriate nonviolent offenders, crime rates have fallen to their lowest levels since 1973.

Research has demonstrated that delinquent youth that learn a marketable skill are far less likely to re-offend and much more likely to be productive citizens who contribute to, rather than drain, Texas's budget.

Its work also includes achieving greater budgetary efficiency. The combined budgets of the former agencies total more than \$660 million.

Through this merger, that budget can be reduced through lower overhead costs, decreased administrative expenses, and streamlined functions. For example, juvenile parole and probation offices in populous counties may now be combined.

But streamlining agency functions is just the beginning. The community-based programs that the department is required to prioritize usually cost less than half of what taxpayers pay to incarcerate a juvenile at a remote state-controlled lockup.

And the era of a new department creates an opportunity to shift towards local residential programs for youths who cannot be safely supervised while remaining at home, such as the group homes in Missouri that have achieved low re-offending rates and cost less than the remotely located TYC lockups.

The benefits of this merger will not be automatically achieved. The board of the new department is tasked with overseeing the merger, governing the new department and bringing these savings to fruition.

As with reform in any sector of government, there are major challenges and opportunities. Today, we must seize this

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new day in Texas juvenile justice to deliver a better future for all Texans.

Jeanette Moll is a juvenile justice policy analyst for the Center for Effective Justice with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit, free-market research institute based in Austin.

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