



Juvenile Justice seeks to replace Bon Air, Powhatan correctional centers

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Posted: Monday, October 19, 2015 10:30 pm

BY MICHAEL MARTZ Richmond Times-Dispatch

Virginia's two juvenile correctional facilities in the Richmond area would be replaced by new, smaller facilities here and in Hampton Roads under a plan unveiled Monday to transform the state juvenile justice system.

The Department of Juvenile Justice is seeking \$66 million in new capital funding and reallocation of \$16.1 million in current funding to build two correctional facilities with a total of 152 beds to house a declining population of juvenile offenders who commit serious, violent crimes.

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The proposal is under review by the administration of Gov. Terry McAuliffe, who will present his proposed two-year state budget in December.

The department wants to use the projected long-term savings in operating costs to expand services in local communities to rehabilitate juvenile offenders instead of incarcerating them in a system that has a high rate of repeat offenses.

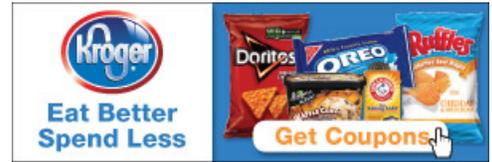
"Rehabilitation is the bread and butter of what we do and what we should be doing," Director Andrew K. Block Jr. said in a detailed presentation to the House Appropriations Committee. "We can lock kids up, but they're coming home."

Four years of deep budget cuts have reduced Virginia's formerly robust network of community juvenile justice programs to two maximum security correctional

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centers — Bon Air in Chesterfield County and Beaumont in Powhatan County — and 56 community placement slots at local juvenile detention centers with beds to spare.

“There have been significant cuts across the board, so there are fewer opportunities today to intervene successfully at an early point in a young person’s life than there were,” Block said in an interview after the presentation.

At the same time, however, the number of juveniles who enter the justice system has declined by almost 38 percent in the past 10 years, with an even sharper drop in the number of cases involving felony and Class 1 misdemeanor offenses that would result in detention.

Consequently, the number of juveniles in state custody has fallen by half since fiscal 2006, Block said. Virginia has 420 juveniles in custody as of Monday — only 23 of them girls — compared with more than 1,000 in 2006.

Almost all of them have been exposed to “significant trauma,” such as physical assault and abuse, parents in prison or with substance abuse problems, and many of them also suffer from mental health disorders.

“They have complex, pervasive, and significant needs and challenges,” said Block, a former University of Virginia law professor and children’s advocate at the Legal Aid Justice Center in Charlottesville.

The juvenile justice department has 2,000 employees, primarily working at the two correctional centers and 34 court service units across Virginia.

If the state were to replace the Bon Air and Beaumont centers with smaller facilities, Block said he would expect to reduce the number of positions primarily by attrition, while training staff to provide treatment and other services in community programs.

“I hope that within four years, we would look very different than we look today,” he said.

Block said the department would not seek additional state operating funds, but would propose to reinvest savings in programs to reduce the system’s high recidivism rate. Currently, almost 80 percent of the juveniles released from state custody are arrested and convicted again within three years and almost half go back into juvenile prisons.

But the initiative faced some skepticism among members of the Appropriations Committee, who expressed concern about potential effects on local governments and the idea of letting the department decide how to spend the money it saves.

“If you don’t need money in some places, it becomes ours,” said Del. Jimmie Massie, R-Henrico.

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Ken Fleet

The Appropriations Committee is right to be skeptical. They need to call in the guards from both places and ask if things are better or worse this year than last. I have listened to a former employee talk about the inmates. I live a few blocks from the Bon air facility and feel safe because these young animals are confined by fences and guards. If some escaped they would slit my throat in a heart beat to avoid recapture. The local communities are not where they belong instead of a cage!

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Karen Phelps Hicks · John Marshall High, Richmond, VA

Wow...What rocket scientist determined that they needed "trained" staff to help these kids??? If you had an 80 percent return rate (and that's been going on for years) you should have figured out long ago that what you were doing wasn't working! Why not refurbish the closed 2 Hanover facilities instead of spending millions on building a brand new facility?

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