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House to Vote Thursday Morning on Juvenile Justice Bill

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By Mike Klein



Mike Klein, Editor
Georgia Public Policy Foundation

The Georgia House is scheduled to vote Thursday morning on juvenile justice and civil code reforms that would dramatically change our response to young people who commit crimes, run away, violate probation or who are in desperate need of services. HB 242, the biggest rethink in Georgia juvenile strategies in decades, is a massive 244-page bill that would rewrite juvenile justice and civil code.

Georgia's juvenile code is a patchwork quilt of rules and regulations that all too often find the code at odds with itself and, at least, difficult to interpret. Two hundred page of HB 242 is the result of several years' work by advocates and legislators. It would update code that in some instances dates back to the early 1970's.

Juvenile justice reforms contained in HB 242 are the result of recommendations of the Governor's Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform. Their recommendations are intended to hold offenders accountable, increase public safety and reduce the cost of the juvenile justice system.

Right now the state spends \$300 million per year on the Department of Juvenile Justice, but more than half of juveniles who leave the juvenile justice system are convicted of a new offense within three years. In addition, nearly one in four youth in an out-of-home facility is adjudicated for low-level offenses, including misdemeanors or status offenses and approximately 40 percent of all juveniles in out-of-home placements are assessed as a low risk to offend.

The juvenile justice system reforms in HB 242 would focus the state's out-of-home facilities on higher-level offenders and implement reforms focused on reducing the likelihood that juveniles will re-offend. Governor Nathan Deal has included \$5 million in his Fiscal 2014 budget (plus an additional \$1 million in federal funding) to expand community-based programs for these lower-risk offenders.

Many of these strategies are adopted from or build on ideas already implemented in states like Ohio, Texas, and Illinois that have proven effective. These states have lessons for Georgia.

Ohio committed to juvenile reforms in the 1990's and almost two decades later Ohio has shown there is merit to focusing expensive state resources on the highest risk juveniles and providing community-based services for lower risk offenders. When Ohio began its reforms 20 years ago, the state's juvenile custody population had increased 40 percent in the previous 13 years and their facilities were at 180 percent of capacity.

The state's leaders decided to change course and created RECLAIM Ohio which provided fiscal incentives to build and use community-based options. Since creating this state / local partnership, the state's juvenile custody population has dropped from more than 2,600 to about 650, the state has closed four facilities, and the state has reinvested more than \$330 million back to communities to create more than 600 local programs. Most importantly, public safety has improved as the state has found that all but the very high risk offenders have lower recidivism rates in the community-based programs than in the secure facilities.

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Illinois began a similar state / local partnership when it created Redeploy Illinois with 15 counties in 2005; four years later it expanded to 28 counties. "Philosophically, policy wise, system wise, Redeploy Illinois is exactly what we should be doing," said John Maki, executive director of the Chicago-based John Howard Association that specializes in adult and juvenile justice system reforms.

There is no denying the benefit that participating counties have seen. Juveniles who were assigned to Redeploy Illinois have had a 17.4 percent re-arrest rate vs. 72 percent for youths sent to state facilities. Re-incarceration rates are also way down 14.2 vs. 57.2 percent.

"The goal of Redeploy was to be able to let counties craft their own evidence-based program to meet what they think their local needs are. To me, that is the genius of it," Maki said. "I would love to see it expand, particularly in Cook County."

Before Redeploy Illinois the state detained about 1,400 juveniles per day in secure custody; now it detains about 900. Two juvenile facilities are scheduled for closures that will save the state about \$17 million per year. "I look at what is going on in our juvenile system as promising," Maki said.

Texas earned a national reputation for adult criminal justice system reforms that began in 2007. The state was also aggressive with juvenile reform. As in Ohio and some Illinois counties, the emphasis is on focusing out-of-home facilities on higher-level offenders and providing more effective, and less expensive, community-based programs for lower-level offenders.

One thing that Texas did was to stop sentencing juveniles convicted of juvenile offenses to state facilities, something Ohio had also done long ago. In addition, the state created a fiscal incentives system for local probation departments similar to Ohio and Illinois. The Georgia Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform made the same recommendations for Georgia, and they are included in HB 242 and the Governor's Budget Report.

Texas has seen positive results. Youths committed to Texas secure facilities declined from 3,000 in 2006 to about 1,000 today. Texas closed two youth facilities and saved \$117 million. Today the state spends about \$85.4 million per year on community programs and \$41.7 million on juvenile secure detention facilities.

The Texas legislative budget office issued a report this year that analyzed the outcomes for adults and juveniles released from state custody in 2007 or 2008. Citing positive results, the report said Texas reduced youths in state secure facilities 67 percent since reforms, and juvenile arrests are down 18 percent compared to 13 percent nationally.

"Ohio, Illinois and Texas are showing the rest of the country that states can cut costs, cut crime, and put more youths on the right track to productive, law-abiding lives," said Jeanette Moll, juvenile justice policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. "It's time for other states to start getting a better return on their investment in juvenile justice."



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