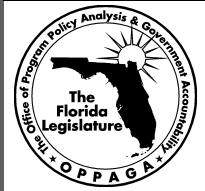




Office of Program Policy Analysis And Government Accountability



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Follow-Up Report on Department of Juvenile Justice Residential Commitment Services

Abstract

- **Creating consequence units for youth who violate community control but have not committed new crimes could save the state approximately \$6 million per year. The Governor's proposed Fiscal Year 1999-2000 budget recommends \$2.9 million for fixed capital outlay for 60 consequence unit beds.**
- **To enhance treatment, more commitment programs should serve special populations such as youth with serious mental disabilities and sex offenders. The Governor's proposed budget recommends a \$1.5 million increase in the Department of Juvenile Justice budget for this purpose.**
- **Reconfiguration of the residential commitment level structure could reduce program costs and place youth more quickly and efficiently.**

Background

The purpose of juvenile justice commitment programs is to protect the public from acts of delinquency and to treat offenders so as to reduce recidivism. The Department of Juvenile Justice operates four restrictiveness levels for residential commitment programs: low, moderate, high, and maximum risk (numbered as levels 4, 6, 8, and 10). According to department staff, the levels are a continuum, with each successive level representing an increased degree of risk to the public. Most levels include a variety of programs. These range from wilderness experiences in level 4 to secure and highly structured confinement in level 10. Some programs, such as boot camps, operate at more than one level.

In Fiscal Year 1997-98, the Department of Juvenile Justice spent approximately \$199 million on residential commitment programs, serving over 8,000 youth in approximately 150 commitment facilities. Over half of the youth were committed at level 6, moderate risk. Although the department operates some residential programs, it contracts approximately 90% to providers.

Purpose

In accordance with state law, this follow-up report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Juvenile Justice in response to our [Report No. 96-48](#), issued in February 1997.^{1,2} This report presents our assessment of the extent to which the department has addressed the findings and recommendations included in our report.

Prior Findings

Our previous report concluded that distinctions among Department of Juvenile Justice commitment levels were unclear; there was often little or no difference from one level to the next in security measures or treatment services. There was also considerable overlap in the criminal justice histories of the youth that judges assign to each level. Despite these similarities, there was much variation in the daily rates the department paid program providers.

We recommended reconfiguring the level system to reduce program costs and place youth more quickly and efficiently. In addition, to enhance treatment,

¹Section 11.45(7)(f), F.S.

²*Review of the Department of Juvenile Justice Residential Commitment Services* [Report No. 96-48](#), issued February 10, 1997.

more commitment programs should serve only special populations such as youth with serious mental disabilities and sex offenders.

We also recommended creating a "tune-up" program for youth who violate community control but have not committed new crimes. Committing these youth to regular residential commitment programs is a costly measure that ties up space needed for serious offenders. In our sample of all 3,316 youth in residential commitment facilities on June 1, 1996, 551 had committed a technical violation but no concurrent crime. If these youth were to spend two weeks in an intensive tune-up program instead of six months in a commitment program that costs \$75 per day, the state could save over \$6 million per year.

Current Status

Two of our recommendations are addressed in the Governor's recommended Fiscal Year 1999-2000 budget.

- The Governor recommends a \$1.5 million increase in the Department of Juvenile Justice budget for services to treat sex offenders and other offenders with special behavioral and mental health needs.
- The Governor also recommends \$2.9 million to construct 60 consequence unit beds in 5-8 bed pods around the state for youth who violate community control but have not committed new crimes. As explained above, these beds could save the state over \$6 million per year.

The Legislature has not reconfigured the residential commitment level system. We identified two options for strengthening the commitment system.

Option 1: Better differentiate residential levels. The department could restructure programs so that length of stay, treatment services, and security are more graduated from level and tie contract rates to these factors. The advantage to this approach would be that it would provide a continuum of programs to respond to increasing degrees of

delinquency. However, as discussed in our prior report, the continuum is difficult and costly to maintain.

Option 2: Replace the current system with a two-tier model based on the demographic and criminal histories of the youth currently in commitment.

- **Tier 1** would be designed for youth who have been assigned to levels 4 and 6. The department would screen youth at regional assignment to identify those with special needs, such as the mentally disabled. These youth would be directed to an appropriate program. The remaining youth would be committed for up to six months to inexpensive wilderness programs, work camp programs, or boot camps. These programs could emphasize responsibility for behavior, learning new life skills, building education skills, and intensive post-release supervision.

As an alternative, Tier 1 could emphasize treatment, with community-based halfway houses where family counseling and community involvement could be introduced more effectively. This alternative would be more expensive.

- **In Tier 2,** juveniles who are dangerous or repeat offenders would be securely confined for a longer period (12-36 months) to protect the public. This group would comprise the type of offenders who have been committed to levels 8 and 10. Tier 2 could emphasize more intensive treatment and staff contact and long-term post-release supervision.

The advantage of Option 2 is that it is more consistent with the characteristics of committed youth. Simplifying the system should make it easier and faster to assign youth, develop programs, and specify the daily rates DJJ pays program providers. Providing short and intense tier 1 stays for nonviolent offenders and longer tier 2 programs for violent offenders is also consistent with what judges told us they would like to have as sentencing options.

We believe Option 2 is preferable, because it would simplify the commitment system, reduce costs, and shorten the waiting time for placement.

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