

DCF wants to open new facility in Middletown to incarcerate girls

Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
Friday, August 2, 2013

The state's child welfare agency is gearing up to open a new state-run facility in Middletown to incarcerate girls who break the law, a move that child advocates say is troubling.

"I wish we didn't need this," Joette Katz, commissioner of the Department of Children and Families, told private providers last month when announcing the plans. "Many of these girls have suffered years of abuse and neglect... I am hoping to provide opportunities for these girls."

Half the girls on parole in Connecticut in 2009, the most recent year reported, had diagnosed trauma disorders. Those disorders were the result of having an immediate family member sent to jail, of physical or emotional abuse, witnessing domestic violence or of being abandoned.

Advocates and attorneys who work closely with girls who enter the criminal justice system say shunting children into a locked facility is not the solution. Girls in the juvenile court system are serving time for low-level offenses; those who are guilty of serious offenses like murder are handled by the adult system.

The state has a handful of residential treatment programs for these girls, but advocates say that children are languishing in them or facing delays in being discharged, which puts the whole system into gridlock.

"Fix those issues, and I question whether you really would need this facility," said Martha Stone, an attorney who represents some of the state's most vulnerable children. She won a class-action lawsuit against the state in 1997 for the conditions of the state's juvenile justice system.

The state reports that the average length of stay at the state's three privately run residential facilities for girls hovers around eight or nine months. The Judicial Branch reports that the average amount of time a child spends in a pretrial detention facility awaiting placement after she has been convicted or pleaded guilty is 33 days. It was unable to provide details because of privacy issues if children remain incarcerated because there is no suitable placement for them.

"The state has failed to serve them for years and now we have to lock them up. It's an admission of failure," said Abby Anderson, the leader of the state's Juvenile Justice Alliance. "We keep reacting to crisis."

'A nice view'

The facility that the Department of Children and Families hopes to open would house 10 to 12 girls on a given day and be located on the Riverview Hospital campus next door to the boys' detention facility.

If the State Bond Commission approves funding for construction, the department will have an existing office building fitted with secure glass, a fence and other housing needs.

The facility, which overlooks the Connecticut River Valley in Middletown, "has a nice view. It's going to be a great place for them to do music and for dance and art therapy," Katz said.

Her intention is for the facility to house girls short-term, which means 30 days. Katz said that these girls have to be incarcerated because otherwise they will run away.

“We’ve always had a problem with girls running... It will have to be a locked facility,” she said.

“We don’t take the use of a locked setting lightly, but for a small number of girls and for a limited period of time, during which we must respond to a crisis, we need to keep the girls safe,” said Gary Kleeblatt, a spokesman for the agency. “The court system regularly asks for secure placements for delinquent girls.”

And when the state can’t provide one, these girls are often sent to live out-of-state in a locked facility.

Nationwide, the majority of youth offenders are male, but the proportion in which girls are being arrested and detained is growing. Twenty years ago, 19 percent of all youth arrests were female; in 2010 they accounted for 28 percent, reports the U.S. Department of Justice.

Fourth attempt

The state has been without a secure girls' detention facility since 2003, when Long Lane was closed after the suicide of an inmate there and the documentation of severe problems by the state’s attorney general and child advocate.

“The same debate has been going on since Long Lane closed. And the question remains on how to treat these girls,” said Mickey Kramer, the acting Child Advocate for the state who has worked at the state's watchdog agency for the past 15 years.

Three attempts to open a new secure facility for girls have failed.

“Wherever we go these days, it’s a major battle,” Department of Correction Commissioner Leo Arnone told legislators in 2011. “It’s just almost impossible to site anywhere... I learned that with the juvenile girls' facility that we tried to site in three different towns. And I’ll tell you, these gals are not dangerous. These are kids.”

The most recent attempt in 2009 to open a new center in Bridgeport was stalled after a state representative raised concerns.

DCF officials hope they don’t run into a similar roadblock this time.

The Middletown legislative delegation said during interviews that they are split on whether to support the proposal after visiting the site with agency staff last month.

Sen. Dante Bartolomeo, co-chairwoman of the legislature’s Children’s Committee, said there is no doubt the state needs this type of facility and thinks the Middletown location is appropriate.

“It’s a nice setting for this type of situation,” she said. “I think the building will work out quite well.”

But Rep. Matt Lesser and Sen. Paul Doyle said they are not on board yet and want to hear more details.

“I am withholding judgment,” said Lesser, who is waiting for input from local officials and nearby residents. “I believe you can have a therapeutic setting while making sure the surrounding community is protected. We need to make sure they strike the appropriate balance.”

State legislators years ago approved funding for the state to build a secure facility for girls, but the Bond Commission, which is chaired by the governor, has yet to vote to release the \$15.6 million earmarked for construction.

Private or public facility?

The new center in Middletown will be a state-operated facility, a decision that has generated mixed reactions.

“We’re concerned. This is setting a bad precedent,” said Ron Cretaro, who, as executive director of the Connecticut Association of Nonprofits, represents private services providers.

Cretaro said that this new facility will be opening as Stepping Stone in Waterbury, a private home, closes.

“Those are the same kids they are now going to serve” in Middletown, he said.

Kramer, the state’s acting child advocate, said that typically, publicly run facilities have less oversight and are more expensive.

“They police themselves,” she said, but she added that workers at private facilities typically have less expertise because of high staff turnover.

Regardless of who runs the center, advocates say that by opening a new secure facility, the state is going against the national trend.

“I just don’t think we should be building secure facilities. These are the sickest, most vulnerable kids... We should be able to give them a better option than locking them up,” said Leslie Acoca, the president of the National Girls Health and Justice Institute, a national advocacy group that researches the juvenile justice system. “When states don’t have good services for girls, they lock them up.”

This proposal comes even as the number of children incarcerated in Connecticut has steadily declined over the last decade.

"There's that old adage that comes to mind here," Kramer said. "If you build it, they will come."

<http://www.ctmirror.org/node/143293>