

These Girls Need Help — Not Another Maximum Security Facility

By MARTHA STONE | OP-ED

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The state has imminent plans to open a girls' maximum security facility on the grounds of the former Riverview Hospital in Middletown. It's a costly, unnecessary, ill-considered plan that should be halted.

The girls involved in Connecticut's juvenile justice system need help. But the state is advancing a plan addressing a real problem with a wrong solution.

Many of the girls who would be sent to the new facility have been physically and sexually abused. Some are in foster care. Most suffer from trauma. Many are victims of sex trafficking; others are runaways.

These are girls with dreams and goals, but they need help getting their lives in order, help overcoming the one-dimensional delinquent label. They find themselves in a system that needs to make better accommodations for their care and safety.

The state Department of Children and Families cites concern for girls' safety as the reason behind locking them up in this place. They are right to be concerned ... there is a problem. But putting these girls in a maximum security facility is not the answer.

Fortunately, the facility hasn't opened yet so there is still time to rethink a flawed plan. Here's why:

Reason No. 1. Connecticut already has a secure facility for girls — Journey House. It is locked, isolated and located on the grounds of Natchaug Hospital, with 14 beds and skilled mental health staff. It has more than enough beds to accommodate the small numbers of children who arguably might benefit from secure confinement.

Reason No. 2. The state could easily avoid spending millions to renovate and staff a second facility, if it fixed its over-stay problem at Journey House. The length of stay at treatment facilities should be no longer than three to six months; research shows us that longer confinement has diminishing returns. Girls at Journey House, however, are locked down for an average of 293 days — nearly 10 months. If the state developed group homes or foster homes for girls who now are held for too long, more beds at Journey House would be freed up. And, state money could pay for needed treatments, not lumber and duplicate staff.

Reason No. 3. There is no state in the country that locks up such a high percentage of its delinquent female population in maximum security settings. The proposed new facility at Riverview would have 12 secure beds, adding to the 14 at Journey House for a total of 26. But there were only 37 girls committed as delinquent for all of 2012. In 2013, only 23 girls were committed, while the total number of girls served in all settings also dropped. When the new facility opens, the number of secure beds at the state's disposal will exceed the number of girls committed as delinquent in an entire year.

Reason No. 4. Children should be incarcerated in maximum security facilities only when they pose a threat to public safety. This facility would be filled with girls who have already been removed from the community because of delinquent behavior and placed in group homes, foster care or residential treatment centers. The rationale for incarceration in this facility is not that they've committed another offense, but that they have run away from their placement or broken its rules. That is not a threat to public safety.

Reason No. 5. Incarcerating girls in a maximum security building for months harms the girls and further burdens taxpayers. The state has not advanced any evidence showing that a new maximum security facility would reduce recidivism or help girls in any other way. Evidence proves the contrary. Confining girls with little opportunity to interact with the outside world is detrimental long-term and can increase rather than decrease their traumas.

Reason No. 6. The proposed new facility has moved forward below the legislative radar with no public hearings. A shift in public policy of this magnitude requires more examination from both mental health and fiscal staff, as well as national girls' juvenile justice experts. Before millions of public dollars are poured into an unneeded facility, legislators and Connecticut's citizens must have more information and answers.

Why not free beds more quickly at Journey House to improve treatment, help the girls and not burden taxpayers? Did we learn nothing from the construction in Middletown of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School, a mammoth new prison for boys whose efficacy and continuing expense everyone questions? The proposed girls' facility, although smaller, is now being rushed down the same track. That's a disservice to the girls and every taxpayer in Connecticut. Let's wait a few more months to get it right.

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