

Locked Facility For Juvenile Girls Debated

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A 12-bed, locked treatment facility for troubled girls is opening March 19 at the former Riverview Hospital in Middletown amid debate over the wisdom of investing \$2.6 million a year in a secure program for girls who have consistently failed in less restrictive settings.

Beyond the philosophical debate are the misgivings on the part of some legislators and advocates that the project became a "done deal" too quickly and should have been more widely vetted before the legislature.

A building at what is now called the Albert J. Solnit Children's Center has been retro-fitted at a cost of \$500,000, an assistant director has been hired, and staff has been assigned. The initiative did not require legislative approval, but Department of Children and Families Commissioner Joette Katz's request for annual operating funds for next year and beyond does need legislative endorsement. The matter is pending before the appropriations committee.

The locked facility will be a satellite of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School and will be overseen by its director, William Rosenbeck.

Katz said a locked treatment program is needed to assure that a small group of girls – including chronic runaways, girls who have committed assaults, and those who may have been sexually exploited – remain long enough to benefit from treatment. She noted that DCF has significantly reduced the number of children in institutional care, and said these new treatment slots will be reserved for the relative handful of girls who pose a public-safety risk and have the most extreme behavioral and psychological problems.

"These girls run, and they take other girls with them, putting themselves and others at risk," said Katz. "If they're not getting the treatment they need, then we're not helping them."

Katz said the plan is that the girls would stay in the locked program for a maximum of six months before being placed back in the community to continued treatment.

Advocates for children in the juvenile-justice and DCF systems say the fact that some girls are continually failing in other programs says more about those other programs than it does about the girls. They said the money would be better spent in expanding and improving services. They said that girls often remain for nine or 10 months at Journey House on the grounds of Natchaug Hospital in Mansfield, currently the state's only locked facility for girls. The extended stays are causing "gridlock" at the 14-bed Journey House. If that problem were solved, the advocates say, there wouldn't be a need for a new locked program in Middletown.

"People ask me what I'd do," said attorney Martha Stone, executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy. "I'd stop the opening and ... address the gridlock at Journey House. You would not need the additional secure beds."

Stone said the Middletown program should have been proposed as part of a coordinated effort between the juvenile court and DCF that also included special foster-care settings and group homes designed for girls with the most-complex needs.

State Rep. Matthew Lesser, D- Middletown said Katz may be right that a locked program is necessary for a small group of the riskiest girls. But he said too many questions remain.

"My concern, as we are hearing the push-back from the advocates, is that this hasn't been appropriately vetted at the legislature," said Lesser. "Is the lack of community placements causing a backlog at Journey House? Is this the best use of taxpayer funds and in the best interest of the girls? I'm not saying Commissioner Katz is wrong, but there hasn't been a comprehensive enough look at this."

Lesser said he and other legislators plan to visit Journey House next week and explore the issue of the extended stays.

A public hearing was held before the appropriations committee a week and a half ago. Katz said two community forums were held in Middletown that were attended by members of advocacy groups.

Only a fraction of the number of boys and girls who come into juvenile court are committed to DCF as juvenile delinquents. In fiscal year 2012, 2,700 girls were referred to the juvenile court for offenses.

Of those, 35 girls were committed by a judge to DCF as delinquent, according to the Judicial Branch's Court Support Services Division. They included the most serious offenders and those who failed in other treatment programs. Some girls from that group are placed in secured facilities.

Stephen Grant, executive director of the support service division, said some of the girls do pose a risk to public safety.

"Some of the 16- and 17-year-old girls are exhibiting very risky behavior, and are vulnerable and very challenging," said Grant. "Occasionally, the response has to be to regulate and stabilize the behavior."

Some juvenile court judges have also spoken out in support of the new locked program.

State Child Advocate Sarah Eagan said that as DCF proceeds with the project, it's crucial the department monitor and report on its performance, track the girls after they are discharged, and gather data on recidivism rates, school performance, and a host of other measures.

"We have to have confidence that this facility isn't standing in isolation, that it is part of a continuum of care," she said. "And we have to be able to report on how well the program is doing."

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