

## Op-ed: One girl's tragedy reveals flaws in state care

By: MARTHA STONE | April 17, 2014

The nation is shocked that Connecticut's Department of Children and Families has sent an abused girl in its care – a girl facing no criminal charges – to an adult prison. I wish that I could be shocked, too. However, this move is another egregious example of a clear pattern of bad decisions regarding girls in state care. It not only points up the need for immediate action to get this girl into a more appropriate setting but also illustrates the crying need for the state to develop an appropriate plan for girls in the juvenile justice system. Isn't it time that the legislature calls for a plan informed by national experts on girls in the juvenile justice system and a timeline of clear action steps so that the department can be held accountable?

The department's characterization of girls in the juvenile justice system was disturbing throughout the recent debate about opening a second maximum-security facility for girls. First it portrayed these girls as victims, often of sex trafficking, who needed to be locked up "for their own good." Later we heard more about girls who were highly dangerous, who needed to be locked up for society's protection. The common theme, obviously, was that they needed more beds to lock these girls up.

But here is what we know about girls in the juvenile justice system:

They are rarely violent. Between Jan. 1, 2011, and Sept. 30, 2013, the most common charge against girls in Connecticut was second-degree breach of peace. Nationally, the most common charges against girls are status offenses – noncriminal behaviors like truancy – and parole violations. They tend to be detained longer than boys for technical violations.

They are indeed traumatized. Up to 92 percent of incarcerated girls have experienced one or more forms of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, according to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. Boys in the juvenile justice system have disturbing trauma histories as well, though girls suffer at higher rates: 65 percent of girls in the system experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, compared with 50 percent of boys.

The girl DCF has just sent to prison has a significant trauma history that includes rapes, beatings, sex trafficking and withholding of food. She first came into DCF care at age 4, and has gone in and out of the department's custody since. So for 12 of this girl's 16 years, the state had an opportunity to intervene, to help the girl recover from the trauma she'd suffered and to make sure that the trauma was not repeated.

Instead of helping her, the state's interventions obviously failed. Roughly half the girls in Connecticut's juvenile justice system have open child welfare cases. They were children DCF had a duty to help and protect. Confinement in a juvenile maximum security facility, let alone an adult prison, re-traumatizes these girls. This is why national best practices call for any child to be assigned to the least restrictive environment that is reasonably safe. This girl – who is transgender and identifies as female – just spent two months at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School, a DCF facility for boys, without incident. This was clearly not the right placement for her, but it illustrates that this child does not need to be in an adult prison for reasons of her own or the public's safety.

Connecticut recently raised the age of juvenile jurisdiction from 16 to 18. That means only young people convicted of the most serious crimes should be going to adult prison. This girl is not charged with any new crime and does not deserve to be singled out for this punitive treatment. The state raised the age because of ample evidence that kids who remain in the juvenile justice system are less likely to re-offend than those who are handled as adults. Furthermore, youths under 18 in adult prisons commit suicide at a rate 36 times that of adults and are highly vulnerable to physical and sexual assault. Because adolescent brains are still developing, kids are highly influenced by their environment and their peer group. You don't want a child accused of no crime at all to have a peer group of adult criminals.

The girl who faces no charges needs to be let out of York Correctional Institution today. And we must make sure that she is the last girl treated in this reprehensible fashion. The legislature should act quickly in the waning days of this session to ensure that the rights of girls in DCF's power are protected.

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