

Adjudicated Juveniles will Stay in Pre-Trial Detention Centers for Foreseeable Future

By: JULIA WERTH | October 4, 2018

Despite plans to provide them with alternative and more suitable housing, juvenile offenders who require secure facilities will continue to reside in the two state pre-trial detention centers for the indefinite future.

The reason: More than two months after taking responsibility for all juvenile cases in Connecticut, the **Judicial Branch is having trouble finding anyone to operate secure community-based facilities. The facilities are needed to house the population that used to reside at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School**, a trouble-ridden, maximum-security facility for boys in Middletown that closed in July.

The Court Support Services Division of the judicial branch only received one response to its initial request for proposal – which it did not accept – and has yet to issue a second one, the division’s executive director said.

So CSSD will carve out 12-bed units in both the Bridgeport and Hartford facilities and contract with Yale Behavioral Health to provide treatment services for the juveniles who were previously housed at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School once operated by the Department of Children and Families.

Even after secure houses are established, according to CSSD, some juveniles will remain in the detention centers.

“This is because some number of youth will occasionally require a higher level of security than the privately operated programs can provide,” said Gary Roberge, executive director of CSSD. “CSSD has received feedback from the provider network that ongoing access to detention support services would improve their willingness to bid on the Regions Secure program.”



The Juvenile Detention Center and courthouse in Hartford.



Roberge said his division will provide what it calls the “Re-entry, Goal Oriented, Opportunity to Nurture Success (REGIONS) program” in the 12-bed units at the detention centers and at secure, community-based houses.

Advocates who for years pushed for the closure of CJTS in favor of community-based programs were surprised and disappointed to hear of state’s plans.

“This is not why we closed CJTS,” said Martha Stone, founder and executive director of the Center for Children’s Advocacy and member of Juvenile Justice Policy Oversight Committee.

Although the detention centers and the anticipated privately operated secure facility will both be locked, Roberge said the detention centers will likely have both greater staffing capacity and the ability to better manage the cost and implications of overtime and worker’s compensation claims. He also said the detention centers can serve as back up for the community-based facilities if they encounter a difficult client.

“I think the primary goal has to be that kids should start off in the community program and be given that opportunity, but I understand what [Roberge] is saying with some of the private agencies [having] a very tough case,” said William Carbone,

executive director of Tow Youth Justice Institute and member of the oversight committee.

But already planning to have 24 beds statewide served by the REGIONS program seems entirely premature to Stone.

“All of this is premature until we get the answers to the RFP,” Stone said. “I would hope they would expedite the release of this RFP now that they’ve already issued the contracts for staff-secure facilities.”

Ron Nelson, AFSCME Local 749 vice president: “...a hard challenge for new staff to work with kids who have been going through the system for years.”

For juvenile detention officers like Ron Nelson who work with these young people each day, the change has come with little training and even less communication. Nelson, who has worked for the judicial branch for more than a decade, is also the vice president of the AFSCME Local 749 union.

“There has been no defined role of what the [REGIONS] program is to all staff. A few hand-picked people and all of the new hires got trained in the REGIONS program. But this is a hard challenge for new staff to work with kids who have been going through the system for years,” Nelson said.

Nelson said he and other juvenile detention officers who haven’t yet been trained in the REGIONS program have still had to work with juveniles in the program because of staffing shortages caused by increased injuries.

Carbone, however, said he believes CSSD is putting together comprehensive RFPs and that “nobody could have expected more than what they have delivered.”

“It simply takes time to create these private nonprofits because they need to get approval from the communities they reside in,” Carbone said. “This is very much evolutionary. We are going to be better in six months than we are now, and better than that in one year, and even better in 18 months.”

Currently, according to Roberge, the REGIONS program functioning in the detention facilities offers a similar set of rehabilitative services to those in community-based facilities.

Services are in line with the most up-to-date research about how to assist juveniles caught up in the judicial system, he said. They include cognitive-behavioral interventions, therapeutic services for youth who have experienced trauma, and efforts aimed at family engagement.

“This is more programming heaped on us,” Nelson said. “They are making us do a whole new job, but we haven’t received communication. We have to be on board and have an understanding of what they are trying to do in order to truly help the clients.”