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City Signals Intent to Put Fewer Teenagers in Jail

By JULIE BOSMAN



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg greeting the crowd after his State of the City speech on Wednesday, where he announced the plan to merge two city agencies.

The Bloomberg administration plans to merge the city's Department of Juvenile Justice into its child welfare agency, signaling a more therapeutic approach toward delinquency that will send fewer of the city's troubled teenagers to jail.

A juvenile center in the Bronx. The system currently uses 28 complexes throughout the state to house about 900 young people.

The integration of the agencies is effective immediately, and was announced by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg in his State of the City speech Wednesday afternoon.

City officials said that under the new arrangement, youths who commit crimes but are not considered dangerous will have easier access to an expanding assortment of in-home programs managed by the Administration for Children's Services, the child welfare agency. This will allow them to stay in their neighborhoods with their families while following a strict set of rules requiring them to stay out of trouble, keep curfews and meet educational goals, officials said.

Seeking to dispel the notion that the city was turning soft on crime, Linda I. Gibbs, the deputy mayor of health and human services, said "the merger will not compromise public safety and will help to keep streets safe." Youth offenders who are considered a high risk to the public will continue to be sent to detention centers, officials said.

Juvenile offenders, usually between the ages of 11 and 16, are typically in the custody of the Department of Juvenile Justice before trial and sentencing. The department, which handles about 5,500 offenders a year, places them in group homes or in one of three detention centers. A judge's typical options at sentencing are to release offenders on probation or send

them to one of the state's juvenile prisons or residential facilities run by nonprofit organizations.

Under the new plan, city officials will more frequently recommend to a judge that a young person be allowed to return home, provided the family submits to intensive visits by therapists and social workers supervised by the Administration for Children's Services.

That type of community-based therapy, meant to set young offenders on more productive paths in life, is a growing alternative to sending youths to notorious

state-run juvenile prisons, which a state task force recently described as broken, ineffective and dangerous. The prisons are also expensive, costing the state and city \$215,000 per youth annually. The system uses 28 complexes throughout the state to house about 900 young people, many of whom have committed only misdemeanor crimes like theft.

"Our No. 1 recommendation was that the state system of juvenile prisons be downsized," said Jeremy Travis, the president of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who led the task force, "and the key element of success in meeting that goal is to provide effective community-based strategies for young people so judges don't have to send them off to juvenile detention."

Ms. Gibbs said the administration had worked for years to reduce the number of youths who are sent to juvenile prisons, while increasing the capacity for community-based programs with family intervention and therapy. Since 2002, the city has reduced placements in state juvenile facilities by 56 percent.

In the last several years, Ms. Gibbs said, the administration has developed a more finely tuned process to determine the level of risk juvenile offenders pose to the public, and whether youths should return home or be sent to detention centers.

"We're detaining fewer kids over all, and now we're detaining the right kids, the high-risk kids," Ms. Gibbs said.

Michael Jacobson, the director of the Vera Institute for Justice, said he thought the combination of agencies was a natural move, given the numbers of children who commit crimes and have also previously

had contact with child-welfare agencies. Studies have shown that nearly 20 percent of prisoners under age 30 have spent time in foster care, according to data from the Center for Family Representation, an organization that provides legal help to parents involved in Family Court.

"The overlap between the two populations is huge," Mr. Jacobson said. "It just makes sense to have the city's children's agency deal with children across the spectrum."

John B. Mattingly, the child welfare commissioner since 2004, will add the title of commissioner of the Department of Juvenile Justice to his duties and oversee both agencies. Neil Hernandez, the commissioner of the Department of Juvenile Justice, has resigned, Ms. Gibbs said.

The focus on community-based treatment for juvenile offenders is an extension of the belief that children are better off with their families than in isolation from them. Ms. Gibbs, a former deputy commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services, said there had been a dearth of therapeutic programs that keep youth in the home, where counselors and social workers can address the problems of the entire family and help parents provide structure and guidance for their children. Those programs will be expanded and new ones developed under the integrated agencies, she said.

"My experience at A.C.S. taught me very clearly that if child protective workers have community-based services at their disposal, to bring services and support into the home, and they feel that the children will be safe, they will use those services," Ms. Gibbs said.

Edwina G. Richardson-Mendelson, an administrative judge of the New York City Family Courts, said she welcomed more options for Family Court judges, who must decide either to return offenders to their families or send them to detention centers.

"The judges of the Family Court are really concerned about the lack of community-based alternatives for youth offenders," she said. "The bottom line is that judges would, of course, prefer to have more options."

Mr. Travis, of John Jay, said that many of the young people who were sent to juvenile prisons had committed only minor offenses and should not have been in prisons in the first place.

"It may sound counterintuitive, but it is a public safety interest to keep young people closer to home in programs that help them become productive citizens," he said.

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In 2007, the Administration for Children's Services and nonprofit providers began the Juvenile Justice Initiative, a handful of programs that send juvenile offenders back to their families and provide intensive therapy. Officials at the agency said the programs reduced recidivism rates for chronic juvenile delinquents by at least 30 percent.

At juvenile prisons, the recidivism rates are high: three-quarters of the young people released from detention are arrested again within three years.

"That's just an outrageous number," Ms. Gibbs said. "Our goal is to improve the entire system so that we break that cycle, and improve public

safety, and improve the lives of these young people who are moving down the wrong path."

City officials said the increased use of in-home treatment programs would save money. By one city estimate, each Juvenile Justice Initiative treatment costs

\$17,000, a fraction of the cost of state detention facilities.

The city could also reduce costs by combining the administrative duties of the Administration for Children's Services and the Department of Juvenile Justice. Ms. Gibbs said it was too early to tell what

those savings might be, or whether the merging of the agencies would result in layoffs.

While some advocates and nonprofit providers said they were concerned about how the Administration for Children's Services, which has recently seen cuts to its budget, will handle the disruption, several said that they were generally enthusiastic about the plan.

"Over all, change that helps see young people and families as a whole is positive," said Susan Jacobs, the executive director of the Center for Family Representation. "As an advocate, I would applaud a change which recognizes the complexity that children are part of a family."