

November 30, 2016

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By [Jessica DaSilva](#)

Nov. 29 — When it comes to overhauling its juvenile justice system, Virginia has garnered a reputation as a model of teamwork and progress. Yet even in a state poised to set a national standard, it's still bedeviled by some of the same problems seen in other states, thanks in part to an outdated national attitude that juvenile offenders only deserve punishment.

"I think that's why we're sort of slow to this because our country is still in an Old Testament, crime-and-punishment mentality," said Amy Woolard, staff attorney and policy coordinator for Legal Aid Justice Center in Virginia. "It's hard to let go of that."

When Virginia saw its juvenile offender population declining, it took a closer look and realized a wider gap in the youth prison population—more minority and disabled kids were finding themselves in youth prisons as compared to white or nondisabled juveniles, said Andrew K. Block Jr., director of Virginia's Department of Juvenile Justice. Moreover, Block said the department reviewed data showing that the longer kids stayed in youth prisons, the more likely they were to re-offend.

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Because many of the kids from youth prisons came from the same low-income communities, it meant those areas were seeing higher recidivism and crime rates, he explained. In response, Block said he and other advocates petitioned the Virginia Legislature for permission to reinvest funds into the system so the department could consistently provide community services across the state to help areas most in need.

Now that those community-based programs are in place and the youth prison population is decreasing across the board, different advocacy groups are encountering conflict as they look

toward the next phase in Virginia's overhaul: Building smaller youth prisons while continuing to invest in community programming.

Meanwhile, all groups face an ongoing effort to educate a public focused on punishment as to why a community-based approach would be more effective.

This is the third and final installment of a three-part series in which juvenile justice practitioners, advocates, and others explain the challenges of overhauling a nuanced and layered system (Part 1: [Clarity, Creativity Combat Ills of Juvenile Fines, Fees](#); Part 2: [Educating Juveniles Stymied by Punishment-First Approach](#)).

Then and Now

Woolard said after the '80s and '90s brought harsher sentencing laws, the 2000s saw funding decreases that resulted in overcrowding of two youth prisons for the entire state and reduced space in juvenile jails.

Virginia only began to see change after Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D) came into office in 2014 and appointed Block, Woolard said. Block came into the position with a background in child advocacy, which she said changed the department's effectiveness.

Getting to that point required plenty of preparation, Block explained. When he was first appointed head of the department, he led a review of 10 years' worth of data from the state's juvenile justice system.

Block said he discovered that 80 percent of offenders who were released were rearrested within three years. That made him realize that juveniles were being returned to communities without a support system and very little preparation for transitioning back into a normal life, he said.

Woolard said kids returning home often face frustrating educational deficits, stigma, and traumatic effects from being imprisoned.

"Without preparation and support, it's hard to not slip back into old behaviors," she said. "We overestimate kids' ability to figure that out on their own. That lack of support can really lead back down the wrong path."

When the Republican controlled Legislature and Democratic governor agreed to reinvest savings into community-based alternatives, it opened up the field for major changes in the juvenile justice system, Block said.

In the past two years, Virginia established a network of community-based alternatives all over the state—a change from when lower-income or rural communities had to send juveniles away to youth prisons to receive the minimal programming available, Block said.

Those changes include alternative placements, treatment for disabilities or substance abuse, and support for reentering communities after incarceration, he said.

"All these strategies linked together to get us a much smaller correctional footprint," Block said.

Conflict Over New Prisons

And while those changes will result in the closure of Virginia's largest youth prison, Woolard said the administration is still planning to direct funds toward building two, smaller youth prisons—a move she called “doubling back on a failed strategy.”

“As advocates we want to redefine what safety really means,” she said. “[Youth prisons] create unsafe environments. Safety isn't about more police or prisons or more kids locked up. It's about more programs after school. Those are the steps we can take that we would want to see in all of our communities.”

Block and Woolard both agree the existing youth prisons are inappropriate for housing juveniles because they are modeled after adult prisons.

“The place is not what you would think of holding children,” Woolard said. “It's claustrophobic and cell block based. There's not a lot of open spaces or natural light. The way you would imagine a prison or see one on TV is what you see here.”

But that's why Block said the two new centers are necessary. The new campuses are designed after community college campuses, Block said. Unlike many states, Virginia is able to keep juveniles up until they turn 21, he explained.

The planned facilities will offer programming for higher risk juveniles who committed more serious crimes and will remain in custody for two years or more. Block said the new youth prisons will provide classrooms for schooling, college classes, and vocational training that will allow older juveniles to get certified as welders, plumbers or other trades.

Overall, the two facilities will reduce the youth prison population from more than 500 beds to about 150—a 70 percent reduction in incarceration, Block said. Those campuses will also be built nearest to the communities that send the most offenders, which will make it easier for family and friends to visit more often, Block said.

“It's unrealistic to think that some kids don't need, at least for some portion of the time, to be confined,” he said. “We need to keep them safe and their community safe and you want that number to be as small as possible and you want them to be in a place to get the services and treatment they need to change their life's trajectory, but I'm confident we can do that in the system we're creating.”

Newest Advocates

One of the biggest challenges in changing the culture of punishment in the eyes of the public and lawmakers is communicating what advocates mean when they say prisons don't work, said Da'Quon Beaver, a community organizer for Legal Aid Justice Center's [JustChildren Program](#).

Beaver spent five years in Virginia's youth prisons, which he said he used to drive his career in advocacy by spearheading an initiative for juvenile offenders by former juvenile offenders called [Rise for Youth](#), an advocacy group under the JustChildren Program that educates lawmakers and the public about why community-based alternatives are better than imprisonment through personal stories.

When a Christmas Day lock down at Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center prevented him from seeing his family, Beaver said he began to cry. That night served as a turning point for him, he said.

“It woke me up in the sense that I started seeing things differently in how staff talked to us, how we were separated from population, things we had no control over, and in every way [the system] dehumanized us,” he said.

Beaver channeled his energy into becoming the president of both youth prisons in which he was incarcerated—similar to a class president—and became an advocate for those dejected kids in the prison. And now, as the leader of Rise for Youth, he leads a team of advocates made up of formerly incarcerated young people between the ages of 14 to 25.

Together, Beaver said they conduct lobby days in Virginia’s capital to meet with legislators and share their feedback on what works in the juvenile justice system based on their experiences. They also inform the public in their communities about how and why community-based alternatives are better than incarceration, he said.

Beaver said the group also involves family members and friends in advocating for juvenile justice reform, with the goal being that the state should not make decisions for juvenile offenders without the input of former juvenile offenders.

The reaction from lawmakers and members of the community has been positive, which just excites participants even more, Beaver said.

“I think that it’s been shown that these stories of youth who have been in the system—they have powerful voices, and I think those are the people we need to be most vulnerable to,” he said.

The program has been a success because everyone needs education on the topic of youth offenders, Beaver said.

“I think people are out of the touch with the fact that we’re working with kids,” he said. “We’re working with kids, with youth, with children. We’re working with people whose minds are not fully formed. Understanding that would give a different mindset to a lot of people.”

(Story has been corrected to reflect appropriate amount of time observed between release of juvenile offenders and rearrest, cited by Block in the 4th paragraph under the subhead "Then and Now.")

To contact the reporter on this story: Jessica DaSilva in Washington at jdasilva@bna.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: C. Reilly Larson at atrlarson@bna.com

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