

Open Forum: Liz Buchanan

Jailing Kids Doesn't Solve Anything

On April 20, the Virginia General Assembly and Gov. Terry McAuliffe agreed to spend about \$40 million on a new juvenile prison in Chesapeake. This money was allocated despite research that overwhelmingly shows that jailing juveniles is not an effective solution for the youngster or his community. The secretary of public safety is convening a task force to look at the needs of juveniles, and specifically the need for future juvenile prisons. Taxpayers have an excellent opportunity to demand solutions that save money and decrease recidivism.

The argument against incarceration is clear. In her book, "Burning Down the House," Nell Bernstein says "prison dehumanizes, not as a side effect but as a central function. A child who is forcibly removed from home and security and placed inside a cage receives a powerful message about herself and her place in the world. ... every aspect of institutional life conspires to diminish a young person's sense of herself as someone who matters. ... Because adolescents are at a stage of life where building a sense of self in relation to others is central to their development, this assault on identity strikes them with particular force."

The Blueprints for Violence Pre-

vention Project out of the University of Colorado reviewed more than 900 programs and identified 10 model programs that were studied a minimum of two times and proven to decrease juvenile offending. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 2011 evaluated the cost effectiveness of evidenced-based practices (i.e., model programs) compared with locking up our youth. Five years ago, the net taxpayer savings of using Multisystemic Therapy, one of Blueprints' model programs, was just under \$30,000. There was a benefit of \$4.07 for every \$1 invested in MST. In Functional Family Therapy, another of Blueprints' model programs, the benefit is just under \$25,000 with, a cost-benefit ratio of \$7.34 savings per \$1.00 invested.

MST has demonstrated a 75 percent decrease in violent felonies in a 22-year followup study.

With decades of research behind them, both programs, widely implemented in other states, have been proven to save money. Yet in Virginia we have only two teams (serving a maximum of 40 families at a time). Why are we allocating \$40 million to build a new facility for juveniles? Why are we choosing ineffective and costly interventions with no family and community-based services?

The research is conclusive that the strongest influences on a young person's behavior are peers. Yet instead of treating them in their environment so positive behavior changes can be supported by those who love them, teach them and coach them, we lock them up, exposing them to other juveniles who will teach them new and more extensive criminal behavior.

In 2006, after Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana — also known as the Incarceration State — committed funds to only evidenced-based programs that divert youth from jail. Their research showed that one bed in a detention center cost \$55,210 per year, which equates to 55 kids served in Big Brothers Big Sisters, 16 kids and families in FFT or 12 kids and families in MST. By decreasing detention beds, Louisiana increased their evidenced-based programming for juvenile offenders to 55 teams serving more than 3,000 youth and their families annually. This coincided with a 73 percent drop in the percent of youth in secure detention.

Take this opportunity to advocate effectively spending tax dollars and demand a continuum of care, including evidence-based programming. Contact Gov. McAuliffe at his website: ow.ly/BLrL30078pb.

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