

New goal for juvenile center: Clear it out

Preckwinkle pushes group homes, other alternatives to 'prison for kid

By **Erika Slife** and **Duaa Eldeib**, Chicago Tribune reporters

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For decades, Cook County's Juvenile Temporary Detention Center has been blasted as a depot for children who were locked up in violent, unsanitary, overcrowded conditions without much consideration given to their mental or physical well-being.

Even after a landmark lawsuit, child advocates say the hulking off-white building on the Near West Side serves more as a jail than a temporary residence for youths waiting to see a judge.

Now County Board President **Toni Preckwinkle** is pitching a new approach for a juvenile justice system that as recently as four years ago was so broken, a federal judge brought in an outsider to take it over.

"I think we need to do everything we can to empty this building out," Preckwinkle said Thursday after touring the facility.

That means putting children in group homes, monitored home confinement and other community-based programs where advocates say youths have better opportunities for counseling, job training and other life-skill instruction.

"What we need to do is have a number of smaller, secure safe homes for kids scattered around the county rather than having one huge juvenile prison," Preckwinkle told the Tribune. "It's a prison for kids. It's an inappropriate setting for almost everybody who's here."

In a way, the county that created the nation's first juvenile court is returning to its roots. Back in 1899, county leaders pursued the progressive notion that children were different from adults, and their legal system should focus on reform rather than punishment. The idea was children, by their nature, were less culpable and more amenable to rehabilitation.

"It was a significant breakthrough," said Bart Lubow, director of the **Annie E. Casey Foundation's** juvenile justice strategy group, which brought a national reform effort to the detention center in the mid-1990s. "The core notion that there should be a different kind of jurisprudence for children who break the law was a radical, worldwide reform."

Advocates note vast improvements at the detention center in recent years under Earl Dunlap, the federally appointed transitional administrator and renowned expert in juvenile justice. Preckwinkle and Commissioner Bridget Gainer argue the wise investment is in rehabilitation and alternative detention programs, not imprisonment.

"This is not baby jail," said Gainer, D-Chicago. "When you're there, you see you cannot write off a 10-year-old or a 12-year-old or even a 15-year-old. The thought that the ship has sailed for these kids is wrong."

To be sure, the detention center often holds the most dangerous and most problematic youths, from alleged murderers to serial delinquents. Police and judges send children there for a number of reasons, typically based on a formula that factors in the severity of their alleged crimes, criminal history, and even home and family situations.

On average, 300 to 350 children a day are locked up in the 498-bed detention center, down from a peak of 800 children in the early 2000s, Dunlap said.

Ultimately, any decision made about the detention center's direction will be up to Circuit Court Chief Judge **Timothy Evans**, whose office was handed control of the center by the Illinois Legislature in 2007. Dunlap said he will likely begin to transition the detention center back to Evans in late 2012.

Evans said Preckwinkle's goals are similar to what his office has been pursuing since it took over the detention center, encouraging juvenile division judges to consider alternatives to detention.

"While saving revenue is important, I have to start with the commitment to justice and safety and stopping the cycle

of violence," Evans said. "If we do that right, the result is the savings to the taxpayer and to the county. In that sense, I think that President Preckwinkle and I will end up in the same place."

Advocates and experts believe that up to 45 percent of the youths housed there today — the ones there for seven days or less, typically for probation violations or outstanding warrants, for example — pose no threat to the public.

The county estimates it costs \$616 a day for a child to stay in the detention center. That's nearly \$225,000 a year, more than the cost of four years at a private university, Preckwinkle likes to remind people.

Preckwinkle said she's making the detention center a top priority next year. She's pumping an additional \$800,000 toward alternative detention programs, which often offer better and more affordable access to social services.

Her budget calls for closing one of the facility's eight in-house centers, each of which houses roughly 45 children, to shave \$1.3 million from the detention center's \$45 million operating budget.

Meanwhile, Gainer has worked closely with detention center administrators to organize a book drive to fill the shelves of the library and has initiated the idea to push back the start time at the center's school to increase learning. This month, Gainer successfully sponsored an ordinance to establish an advisory board tasked with overseeing the children's transitions from the detention center back to the real world.

"It's the absolute stated mission of the juvenile temporary detention center to be something in place of the parents. It's not just about punishment," Gainer said. "There are 10-year-olds in the (center), and it's not just because they did something wrong, but it's because the adults around them completely failed them."

Indeed, they were once called "the forgotten children."

Conditions at the detention center were so dreadful that in 1999, the **American Civil Liberties Union** sued the county on behalf of the children.

"The place was a filthy, overcrowded, violent, chaotic mess," said Benjamin Wolf, associate legal director for the **ACLU of Illinois**, who referred to the children as forgotten.

That followed a lawsuit more than a decade earlier, in which the ACLU asserted that youths were being held at the center well after a judge ordered their release because parents and guardians didn't claim them. Some spent up to a year waiting.

The 1999 lawsuit was a major step toward reform, but change took years.

In 2007, then-County Board President **Todd Stroger** relinquished control of the center to Chief Judge Evans, and Dunlap came in.

Dunlap was lauded for transforming a patronage-based hiring system, bringing in more professional staff and working to reduce the number of children detained, said Thomas Geraghty, the court-appointed representative in the case and director of the Bluhm Legal Clinic at Northwestern University. The staffing plan ran into a court challenge by the Teamsters, however.

Randolph Stone, who directs the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Project at the **University of Chicago**, said more needs to be done to divert youths who shouldn't be there, as well as to shorten the length of stay and strengthen community placement options.

"All the literature seems to say that residential confinement is a last resort in terms of ameliorating the issues that brought the kids in there in the first place," said Stone, a former county chief public defender.

Last year, the **John Howard** Association found that the detention center's population remained "inappropriately high," some staff members were untrained and underqualified, and there continued to be a lack of a continuum of

care.

The challenges remain daunting, advocates said.

"The children that I represent who wind up there for the first time are frightened," Geraghty said. "They're frightened of the other kids, of the staff. ... It has to be a terrible experience for kids who are in there for the first time or who go back and forth many, many times for that matter."

With Dunlap's temporary position nearing an end, speculation and apprehension abound.

"I think the situation (at the detention center) was in many ways the shame of this community for many, many years," Wolf said. "I'm hoping with the hard work that Mr. Dunlap has done, what President Preckwinkle has said and the work of many people in the court system, it'll be a place we can point to with pride."

During her Thursday tour, Preckwinkle fell back into her role as a former teacher, quizzing 19 boys and girls about government and its functions. And then she made them a pledge.

"If I were here, I would do everything in my power never to come back," Preckwinkle said. "I'm going to do everything in my power to see to it that as few people as possible end up in this place. You ought to do everything in your power to see that you never come back."

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