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Report criticizes Harris County juvenile facilities

Inconsistent prosecution standards add to crowding, it says

By **BILL MURPHY**

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Local judges, probation employees and others are operating under a patchwork of sometimes quirky standards for deciding which youths get sent to Harris County's crowded juvenile detention facilities, according to a new study.

One juvenile court judge, for example, orders youths with cases in his court into a detention facility if they miss school seven days, a report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found. Other youths who possibly should be detained before trial are released because there is no space to hold them.

"The development of a uniform, objective approach to detention decision-making should be a high priority," the report says.

A committee that will be chaired by County Judge Ed Emmett and include Houston Police Chief Harold Hurtt, Commissioner Sylvia Garcia and juvenile court Judge Mike Schneider will hold its initial meeting Wednesday to discuss ways of implementing the report's recommendations.

The report is a product of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, a wing of the Casey Foundation. The initiative will continue to advise the county and its officials on ways to thin out detention facilities.

The report said the district attorney's office clogs up the juvenile justice system and takes time away from serious cases by filing charges against all youths accused of Class A and B misdemeanors.

Class B misdemeanors include shoplifting, possession of less than two ounces of marijuana and evading arrest. Class A misdemeanors include assaults related to fighting and thefts.

Harvey Hetzel, director of the county Juvenile Probation Department, said the system would be less burdened if the district attorney's office deferred prosecution in some of these cases.

But Bill Hawkins, chief of the District Attorney's juvenile division, said juvenile crime would rise if prosecutors didn't hold youths accountable and bring them to court. In Harris County, too many juvenile cases went the deferred prosecution route until the mid-1990s, and juvenile crime increased, he said.

"We'd be turning back the clock to something that was a disaster before," Hawkins said. "It's important that kids come to court and see some formal level of accountability in court."

The report said the 250-bed detention facility at the Juvenile Justice Center has air conditioning/heating problems. Parts of the facility are too warm, but most areas are too cold.

"There were kids sitting in an open recreation area wrapped in blankets because of the cold," the report said.

The facility also lacks classrooms for youths, forcing some to be taught where they dine and socialize.

The county spent \$58 million to renovate the former Criminal Courts Building at Fannin and Congress and turn it into the Juvenile Justice Center.

Within months of its opening two years ago, juvenile court judges complained that lower-level floors reeked of sewage, courtroom doors were noisy and courtrooms lacked audio-visual equipment.

Pricey practice

The report said some youths are held unnecessarily while awaiting psychological evaluations sought by the Juvenile Probation Department.

"Surely there could be less of these (evaluations), and most of them could be completed on an out-of-custody basis," the report said. "The cost of this current practice may be exceptionally high."

Juvenile cases must move through the system more quickly, opening up beds in crowded detention facilities, the report said.

If the county develops objective standards for holding and releasing youths awaiting trial, it could hold those accused of the most serious crimes and those unlikely to return to court.

But the county could release many others and develop a system for monitoring them by relying on probation department personnel and employees and volunteers from community organizations, the report said.

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These young criminals are not on vacation people ! Maybe some of the hardships would make them or their parents think twice about their choices !
THIS IS WHAT WE SHOULD CONSIDER AS TOUGH LOVE !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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Sadiemama wrote:

Based on past experience, putting these kids under the supervision of the probation department doesn't do a single thing EXCEPT put stress and strain on the kids parents - having to take time off from jobs to take them to probation, for drug tests, for psych evals, to court, etc etc etc I nearly lost my job because my 17 year old son was smoking a cigarette out on the sidewalk.

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most of those kids in the facilities are much better off then they have ever been living with their parents

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Too hot, too cold; Poor babies...

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