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Macomb juvenile justice center to layoff 25 workers

Detroit Free Press – October 7, 2015, By Christina Hall

Macomb County is planning about 25 layoffs at its juvenile justice center as the number of youth in the detention and residential treatment center has declined -- a trend that officials there said is occurring across the region and state as youth are placed in less-restrictive services.

The announcement today came a day after a bi-partisan group of legislators from metro Detroit introduced a package of bills in Lansing that would raise the age when a juvenile is considered an adult in the criminal justice system from 17 to 18 years old.

Michigan is one of nine states that automatically prosecutes 17-year-olds as adults, according to a release from Michigan United. The bills would allow youth to be transferred to the adult system on a case-by-case basis, state Rep. Peter Lucido, R-Shelby Township, said in a news release from the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency.

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Macomb exec lashes out at attorney in jail death suit

Part of the legislative package would create a financial incentive for counties to use community-based programs over expensive residential facilities.

Macomb County Deputy Executive Mark Deldin said the county's 140-bed juvenile justice center — renovated a decade ago for \$29 million -- has fewer than 40 youth. It is staffed for 120 youth, he said, including those from neighboring St. Clair County, which closed its underused juvenile detention facility two years ago.

Now, about 25 case managers and youth specialists will be laid off in the next four to six weeks because of declining occupancy, Deldin said, calling the layoffs an "uncomfortable and unpleasant task" but one that is a "fiduciary responsibility."

The positions remain in next year's budget and workers could be called back if there is an influx in youth. But that may not occur, in part, because juvenile court filings also are down, said Nicole Faulds, juvenile court director.

Juvenile Justice Center Director Rhonda Westphal said there is an effort to reinvent the center through more training for staff, hiring a treatment manager and having more evidence-based curriculum and programs that better cater to the needs of the youth, perhaps drawing more youth to the center instead of programs elsewhere.

She said the reduction in youth started about five years ago.

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Jail death lawsuit. He was naked, hurting, no one aided

"Some variables that directly impact, vary from community, is a growing trend in juvenile justice using the least restrictive services for kids," Westphal said.

Faulds said detention and residential treatment are a "last resort for a public safety issue," adding that once youth are in detention they often don't finish high school and end up in the adult criminal justice system.

Westphal said of the state's 19 county court-operated facilities, they have 50% or less youth in the detention or treatment facility, a trend that she said is a national one.

On Monday, the 190-bed Wayne County Juvenile Detention Facility had 97 youths, said Lloyd Jackson, communications and community outreach director for the county's Department of Health, Veterans and Community Wellness. He said 21 temporary non-union positions were eliminated and 10 full-time union employees were laid off at the center during Wayne County Executive Warren Evans' restructuring process.

Jackson said the decline in the number of youth at the center is attributed to diversion and youth assistance programs and in-home care facilities.

Westphal told Macomb County commissioners that Oakland County Children's Village, which offers detention, residential treatment and shelter care services, had less than 47% capacity a couple of months ago.

According to the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency, there has been a movement in the last decade or so in the juvenile justice field to treat youth closer to home and in less-restrictive environments. The community-based programs cost less, reduce re-offending and incidents of violent youth crime, and improve youth and family well-being, experts say.

In addition, the number of arrests of juveniles ages 10-16 have been dropping steadily in Michigan from 2008 to 2013, when there were 13,265 arrests. That total accounted for a very small portion of the 260,000 total arrests reported in the state that year, according to Michigan's Statewide Juvenile Arrest Analysis Report released in June. It stated most of the juvenile crimes were for larcenies.

The number of 17-year-olds arrested were 8,514 in 2013, according to the report.

The statewide youth offender reform bills were introduced this week because of a growing concern of the treatment of youth in Michigan's adult prison system, according to releases announcing the proposals.

More than 20,000 youth under 18 have been sentenced as adults in Michigan during the past decade, with most convicted for nonviolent offenses and with no prior juvenile record, according to releases.

The proposed changes, which follow recommendations from a recent report by the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency, would permit 17-year-olds to be processed in juvenile courts; prohibit youth under 18 from being sent to adult jails, and eliminate certain offenses that automatically trigger adult prosecution, such as running away from a juvenile facility, according to the council.