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Making Juvenile Justice More Humane and Effective

Julie Ellen McConnell

University of Richmond, jmcconne@richmond.edu

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Julie McConnell & Sue Kennon: Making juvenile justice more humane and effective

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LONG COMMUTES, high costs and too much time away from family are among the most common frustration for workers in Virginia. But while those annoyances may be tolerable when it comes to our daily commutes, they have become an unfortunate feature of Virginia's youth justice system, which confines hundreds of youth in large institutions far from their homes.

When young people have regular visits with their family and other members of the community, they have a much higher chance of being rehabilitated and successfully returning to those communities. Currently, many incarcerated youth in Virginia are held far from their families, unable to stay connected due to high travel costs and restrictive visiting hours. This model, which inhibits regular and therapeutic contact, is untenable, unfair, and counterproductive to our goal of helping young people eventually rejoin their communities and become productive citizens.

Currently, Virginia has two juvenile correctional centers for young people serving long sentences. One is in the Bon Air area of Richmond ; the second is in Beaumont in northern Powhatan County. For too many youth held in these facilities, a lack of access to family can have long-lasting consequences.

For example, one young person who was committed to Beaumont when he was only 15 went months without seeing anyone from his family, because the trip from Hampton Roads was too far for the family to afford. While he worked hard to improve himself, he often felt depressed and alone.

He was challenged by learning disabilities that hampered efforts to prepare for his GED and complete the certifications available to him in the facility. He worked hard to get back to his family, but because he was so far away it was hard to plan for his re-entry. Ultimately, he found it difficult to make the connections he needed to pursue employment. He is home now and struggling to reintegrate.

Unfortunately, results like these are not uncommon for incarcerated youth in Virginia. That's unacceptable - and our system needs to adapt to give our youth a true chance to rehabilitate and succeed.

In creating a juvenile justice system that holds youth accountable while also preparing them for success upon their return home, Virginia must look to the research and experiences of other states. Directors of state corrections agencies have said that youth are more content and more likely to engage in treatment when families are involved. Additional data confirms that what Virginia needs is a true continuum of proven, community-based alternatives to incarceration and a system of small, secure placements of 30 beds or less, regionally based and focused on development and rehabilitation.

Fortunately, there is recognition among Virginia lawmakers that the system is broken and needs to change.

The General Assembly is currently considering Gov. Terry McAuliffe's proposed budget that includes downsizing current facilities and investing in a continuum of services for youth. At the same time, the proposal includes the construction of two new large, centralized institutions that will not fully address the need to maintain connections with families and communities.

While the proposal calls for a more enlightened approach in terms of design, the simple fact remains that large institutions just breed more criminal behavior. If we want young people to successfully reintegrate, we must operate therapeutic facilities that are smaller and more geographically diverse.

If we truly want to both hold youth accountable when they break the law and also do our best to help them avoid criminal behavior in the future, we must follow evidence-based research indicating that smaller facilities where all of the employees know each child by name and understand their background and trauma history have the greatest success in reducing recidivism. These young people will come back to our communities. When we treat them humanely and intelligently, we will all be safer.

• *Index terms: juvenile justice; reform; mcauliffe; rehabilitation; budget*

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