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Troubled children centers closing

Institutions shuttered as state pushes community programs to save money.

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

Adrian Training Center will be shuttered Jan. 24 to help close a \$540 million shortfall in Michigan's budget -- but the plan also signals the end of an era in how troubled children are treated in the state.

The institution was in operation for nearly 130 years and cost taxpayers \$7.8 million annually for the treatment of 31 wayward girls. But in Michigan and nationwide, experts are moving away from institutionalizing children -- a trend that affects not only juvenile delinquents but other children with severe emotional or behavioral problems placed in long-term residential treatment centers, where they often remain for years.

Instead, the state is shifting resources to keep children at home or in foster homes, reflecting today's belief among child welfare experts that institutions are outmoded, expensive and ineffective. But some child advocates say severely ill children cared for in the community often aren't getting the services they need to be successful. And many in law enforcement complain delinquents can be a danger to their communities.

"The whole field nationally is going to less restricted settings, community settings like day treatment where a kid may go to (a regular) school," said John Evan, director of the Bureau of Juvenile Justice within the state Department of Human Services.

Although they are commonly viewed as jails for minors, state-run and privately operated juvenile detention facilities are treatment centers for troubled children, Evans said. The facilities provide the therapy, vocational training, structure and an array of other services to address the root problems that cause children to commit crimes, he said.

The number of children in public or private institutions for delinquents has plummeted from more than 2,500 in 1997 to fewer than 500 this year, state data show. The state no longer can afford expensive residential treatment, Evans said.

When Wayne County took authority over its juvenile justice programs in 2000, it focused on intensive home-based services aimed at keeping children in the community, said Sue

Hamilton-Smith, director of Juvenile Justice Services for Wayne County's Department of Children and Family Services. She said less than 10 percent of those who complete treatment in Wayne County's community-based programs will commit a crime again.

"The most effective approach is community-based care and having young people close to their families," Hamilton said.

Still, Howell Police Chief George Baser, president of the Michigan Association of Police Chiefs, said that delinquents often commit more crimes when they're placed back in the community.

"We have some juveniles that are very violent, operating in communities, (who) need to be in detention," Baser said.

In the case of children not yet in trouble with the law, some in need of residential treatment who don't get it often end up in the juvenile justice system, said Janet Snyder, executive director of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families.

Too much for one person?

The state also is institutionalizing fewer children who are troubled -- kids like the one mentored by Redford Township foster mom Judy Bradley-Parsons.

A ward of the state since age 2, the boy went through a succession of foster homes and a failed adoption before the state Department of Human Services placed him in a private residential treatment center when he was 4. He's been institutionalized for the past six years, but visits Bradley-Parsons' home on holidays and occasional weekends.

"His needs are so great one person could not possibly take care of him," Bradley-Parsons said of the child, who suffers from extreme hyperactivity, psychosis and severe behavioral problems.

Many private institutions for children with mental, emotional or behavioral problems say they are getting fewer referrals from the state to treat foster children or kids who have been abused or neglected. The 172-year-old Children's Home of Detroit blamed the decline in state referrals for the decision to close down last month. "The problem we've seen is that even in cases where there is a demonstrated need for the kind of intense treatment residential allows, there is a reluctance to use it," said Barbara MacKenzie, regional director for Lutheran Child and Family Service in Metro Detroit.

"They either receive no services at all, they end up on the street, they end up in foster placements that are no good for them, or they end up in the juvenile justice system, which is hugely more expensive," Snyder said.

But state officials say children with such problems can succeed in a family or a foster home if support services -- like intensive outpatient therapy and family counseling -- are made available.

"We ... want to keep kids in community settings if at all possible," said Mary Chaliman,

manager of the state Department of Human Services Foster Care Office. "We don't want kids growing up in residential treatment centers."

Cost for residential care high

Residential treatment is expensive, and some child advocates argue that with few exceptions, the money could be better spent providing intense monitoring and services to children in their own homes and communities.

"At a time when Michigan has to spend every dollar they can get on what works, it's a shame to throw money away," said Richard Wexler, executive director of the Alexandria, Va.-based National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. "There's no magic to putting them behind a fence in an institution. When you provide the birth parents or the foster parents with all the help they need, they do fine."

The state pays privately run institutions a per diem rate that can range from \$132 to \$175 or more per child. Michigan's state-run centers for juvenile delinquents are much more expensive.

It costs roughly \$560 per day to treat a child at the W.J. Maxey Training School in Whitmore Lake, which has a \$17 million annual budget but just 59 boys in residence, according to Evans. Likewise, fewer than 40 kids remain at Bay Pines, Nokomis Challenge Center and Shawono Center -- which each cost \$4 million to \$4.5 million annually to keep open.

The kids who remain at state-run juvenile facilities are the most serious juvenile offenders, Evans noted. Experts say private facilities, whether they treat delinquents or children who are troubled, need to retool their programs to catch up with changing trends. Some in Michigan already are.

Lutheran Child and Family Service is exploring how better to use its campus at Boys and Girls Republic, its 80-bed residential treatment center for abused and neglected kids in Farmington Hills, since many of its beds are empty, MacKenzie said. And Camp Highfields in Onondaga has shortened its program for juvenile delinquents to roughly six to eight months.

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