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Times-Picayune

EDITORIAL: Reform on lockdown

Sunday, December 21, 2008

When the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana filed suit on behalf of juveniles at the city-run detention center last December, the group complained about inhumane conditions. Young people sat confined in cells for 20 hours a day without adequate schooling, medical care or even food.

The group isn't alone in its concerns about the Youth Study Center. Orleans Juvenile Court officials, the League of Women Voters and Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans have all been pushing for reform at the center, and the lawsuit itself came only after months of unsuccessful prodding.

But the Juvenile Justice Project says that little has changed in the year since it went to federal court. The lack of progress is frustrating, and while the Nagin administration has said that the center is a priority, that's far from evident.

In fact, administration officials maintain that the lawsuit itself prevents the city from working with the Annie E. Casey Foundation or any other organization to improve the center.

"The fact that we are in litigation is a poor excuse," said Dana Kaplan, executive director of the Juvenile Justice Project. But that is precisely the excuse city officials are making.

Last month, the City Council wouldn't even watch the Justice Project's videotaped interview with a teenager who had been held at the center. The teen didn't come in person because he didn't want to miss school. But City Attorney Penya Moses-Fields said that watching the tape could harm the city's defense in the lawsuit.

This see-no-evil posture can only hurt the city. A survey recently named New Orleans the nation's murder capital. Even without that title, violent crime is clearly a scourge, one that drags down this city's psyche and its recovery efforts. The young inmates of the Youth Study Center are the most serious juvenile offenders. It doesn't take a criminology degree to see that the city is missing an opportunity to intervene in their lives.

Lesley Eugene, a spokeswoman for the city, says that Youth Study Center employees are participating in other working groups under the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. Iona Picou, who coordinates the initiative as head of community projects for Juvenile Court, confirms that claim.

But when it comes to the one aspect of juvenile justice that the city actually controls, the Youth Study Center, Ms. Picou says that the city is effectively blocking change.

Members of the working group on conditions of confinement have not been allowed inside the center. These are people who are trained to evaluate juvenile detention centers and offer suggestions and assistance for improving them.

Bart Lubow, who heads the initiative for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, says he hasn't heard from Youth Study Center employees for about a year.

Ms. Kaplan says her organization has offered to work out an agreement that would allow the working group on confinement to move forward. That would be far better than stalling all possibility of reform and improvement until the lawsuit is resolved. City officials ought to at least consider this offer.

New Orleans cannot afford to reject help when it comes to any aspect of criminal justice. A poorly run juvenile detention center isn't only harmful to the young people who are locked up there, it also poses a danger to the community at large. That was evident in the four break-outs that occurred over a two-year period.

At worst, young people will emerge more violent and dangerous than before their confinement. But even if they are simply no better, that's a lost opportunity to make our streets safer in the future.

The center itself will be replaced thanks to FEMA dollars and voter authorization to borrow money for criminal justice improvements. But how the center is run is as important as its

physical condition. When experts from the Annie E. Casey Foundation first came on the scene -- before the lawsuit was filed -- they offered recommendations that Chief Juvenile Court Judge David Bell described as low-cost or no-cost. But the city has been slow in implementing them. That's inexcusable.

Better facilities will solve some of the problems with juvenile detention, but a better trained and motivated staff also is critical. If the modus operandi remains keeping kids in lock-down and denying them a chance to keep up with their studies or their medication, it will make little difference if they are in a cleaner, newer cage.

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