



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Catharine Young

Senator Young Announces Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform

CATHARINE YOUNG June 24, 2009

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ALBANY - Senator Catharine Young (R, C, I – Olean) today announced the creation of a new Special Legislative Task Force on Fixing the Broken New York State Juvenile Justice System.

The Task Force was formed to address a growing concern by community members, youth facility staff, and law enforcement officials who cited the closure of 14 youth facilities and reporting centers throughout the state, along with newly implemented policies set forth by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), as the reason for a rise in youth violence.

“This year’s budget included a systematic upheaval of the entire juvenile justice system in this state, without any clear proof this new misguided system is going to work,” said Senator Young. “The safety of the public has been compromised because troubled youths are not getting the urgent treatment and attention that are needed.”

“Those who voted to close these facilities should be ashamed, and anyone who instituted policies that have led to an increase in violence should be held accountable. Brick-by-brick the Governor and OCFS Commissioner Carrion are dismantling a system at the tragic cost of seeing families forced to bury their loved ones,” added Sen. Young.

The announcement of the Task Force comes in the wake of the brutal June 8 murder of 24-year-old Renee Greco, an employee at a youth home in Lockport, New York, allegedly at the hands of two teenage residents.

“The shocking and cold blooded bludgeoning that took place at this facility begs the question if this heinous act could have been avoided had the two youths charged in this case been properly placed in a

facility better suited to address to their violent tendencies,” said Sen. Young.

“There’s just such a complete lack of accountability,” Senator George D. Maziarz (R-C, Newfane) said. “Every day there is more news of violence in one of these facilities or that a resident is unaccounted for out in the community. Violent juveniles are inappropriately being placed in these facilities and OCFS, as the gatekeeper of these homes, is putting everyone at risk – the community, the staff, and other juveniles within the home. A drastic overhaul needs to be done and the start of that process is this Juvenile Task Force.”

“This task force is an important first step to address growing concerns that our juvenile justice system is dysfunctional, dangerous to clients, staff and the community, and the reason why we need to take a closer look and find out where we can make improvements,” said Senator Dale M. Volker. “We all want to do what is best for these at-risk kids so that they can become productive citizens and assets to their communities. At this moment, it is obvious that the State of New York can do better to reform these young people and get them back on the right track. By taking a hard look at the system, we will be able to get better results, and at the same time improve the safety of staff and the communities in which these facilities are located.”

Members of the Task Force have pointed to the Lockport incident as an example of a disturbing trend emerging in relation to violent youths and residential services. In February, Rochester Police Officer Anthony DiPonzio sustained a life-threatening and debilitating injury when he was shot in the back of his head by a juvenile who had run away from a private state-licensed facility.

Senator Joseph Robach said, “We all want the youth of our community to grow up with a good support system in the form of a good education and opportunities that will help guide them to become productive, law-abiding citizens. Unfortunately, when a young person follows the wrong path and commits a heinous, violent crime we have no choice but to ensure the safety of the community and the people who work at youth facilities by providing for these dangerous offenders to be located in a more secure juvenile detention center. The tragic shooting of Officer Anthony DiPonzio by a youth in Rochester is just one example of why we need a task force to review and reform our Juvenile Justice System.”

“During the recent budget debate, I warned the Senate Democrats who supported Governor's Paterson's budget that they were giving the Governor unprecedented authority to close State detention facilities and there would be significant repercussions to Upstate New York,” said Senator Mike Nozzolio. “By closing badly needed juvenile justice facilities, crime rates will undoubtedly increase and the safety of our communities will be jeopardized. We must correct this dangerous mistake before even more tragedy occurs.”

In August of last year, a security guard at the Tryon Residential Center in Johnstown, NY suffered a stroke and died a month after he was hit in the head with a wooden club by a teenage resident. Months after the incident, several employees sought and obtained orders of protection so they could come to work.

“Staff has become targeted and put at risk by street smart kids who are taking advantage of the loopholes in the new system,” said Senator Hugh Farley (R, C - Schenectady). “Security and other staff members are concerned for their safety and at some facilities they have even sought orders of protection against some of the more violent residents.”

As a result of this year’s budget, Governor Paterson ordered the closing of nine juvenile detention and reporting centers including: Adirondack Residential Center in Clinton County, the Cattaraugus Residential Center and Great Valley Residential Center in Cattaraugus County, the Pyramid Reception Center in the Bronx, the Rochester Community Residential Home in Monroe County, and the Syracuse Community Residential Home in Onondaga County. Three Evening Reporting Centers (ERC) were also closed including the Capital District ERC, the Buffalo ERC, and the Syracuse ERC. Tryon Residential Center in Johnstown, and Allen Residential Center in South Kortright, were subject to downsizing and additional budget cuts.

Last year, five other OCFS run facilities were closed including Auburn Residential in Cayuga County, Adirondack Wilderness Program in Clinton County, Brace Residential in Delaware County, Cass Residential in Albany County, and Gloversville Group Home in Fulton County. Lansing Residential in Tompkins County was downsized by 50 percent.

Senator Marty Golden (R-C-I, Brooklyn) stated, "As a former New York City Police Officer, I believe this new task force to be one charged with tremendous responsibility. The closure of six youth detention facilities across our State have, and will, continue impact the public safety of all New Yorkers. When the task force meets for the first time, we are going to find that we are losing control of our troubled youth instead of helping them get their lives back on track. This fails New York's families and New York's future. We must work to change that."

“The most important thing at these facilities is the safety of residents as well as employees,” said Senator Betty Little. “Many of these youths are deeply troubled and potentially violent. They deserve a fully functioning system that is going to help them recover, learn to make better choices and grow in preparation of reentering society. Likewise, the employees of this agency need and deserve the reassurance that everything is being done to ensure their work environment is as safe as possible.”

State Senator John Bonacic (R-I-C – Mt. Hope) said, "Keeping employees safe in OCFS facilities must be our first priority. Employee after employee tells me they have lost faith in the management of OCFS. Juvenile justice requires the goal to be justice - for both the victim of juvenile crime and for the

juvenile offender. The OCFS leadership has failed both crime victims and the young people they are supposed to be rehabilitating."

On top of the budget cuts, Task Force members said a continued breakdown in discipline and escalating violence at remaining facilities has resulted from new "misguided" policies initiated by OCFS Commissioner Carrion. The agency has emphasized a new "therapeutic approach" that strips the ability of staffers to maintain discipline and assert control when necessary.

"One of the new policies has employees being told to reduce from seven to three the types of situations where they can use physical force to restrain hostile inmates that pose a serious threat," said Senator Young. "Attacks on staff are becoming more brutal by the day and some employees have even reached a point where they are afraid to go to work. Staffers need the level of control that allows for better structure and guidance these troubled youths need."