

# Ga. House lawmakers OK juvenile justice reform

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY, Associated Press  
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ATLANTA (AP) — Lawmakers in the House approved a sweeping overhaul of Georgia's juvenile justice system on Thursday, unanimously approving the bill that now heads to the Senate for consideration.

The overall goal of the legislation is to reduce the number of repeat offenders and bring down costs within the juvenile justice system. The legislation,

based on recommendations of a special panel convened by Gov. Nathan Deal, calls for emphasizing community-based programs over residential detention centers for non-violent youth offenders, providing judges with greater discretion in sentencing and offering more mental health and drug counseling.

Before lawmakers voted, bill sponsor Rep. Wendell Willard, R-Sandy Springs, urged lawmakers to consider the high costs of the current system. He noted Georgia spends more than \$90,000 a year on each youth offender behind bars and said 65 percent who are released end up back in jail within three years.

"You can put a child through the finest college in the country for less than that," Willard said.

The reform is estimated to save the state nearly \$28 million between now and 2015 and allow the state to cease plans to build two additional secure residential detention facilities, Willard said. He noted the effort drew bipartisan support, involved input from and was modeled on reforms passed in Texas and Ohio.

The overhaul has been a few years in the making. A bill with similar goals stalled during last year's session after there were concerns about who would bear some of the costs in transitioning from a system relying heavily on secure residential detention facilities to one with a strong emphasis on community-based programs.

Willard said those concerns have been addressed and some of the money saved by the state will be reinvested in programs established by the legislation. For instance, he said the governor has allocated \$5 million in his budget to help local officials in areas where there are high concentrations of those who would be eligible for such programs to pay for them.

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The effort also comes a year after state lawmakers enacted major changes to the adult criminal justice system with similar aims of reducing costs and repeat offender rates, while also offering greater flexibility to judges on sentencing.

Willard said the enormous cost savings for both efforts should negate any misperception that Georgia was becoming soft on crime. He reiterated that the worst offenders would still be locked up. He said 40 percent of youth offenders in secure residential detention centers are there because of a misdemeanor-type offense or a crime that only a youth can commit — like truancy or running away from home.

"Why are they there? They are there because there are not programs currently in the community that judges can send them to," Willard said in an interview after the vote.

The effort for juvenile justice reform has also drawn the support of Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Carol Hunstein, who urged lawmakers to adopt the reforms during her State of the Judiciary speech earlier this month.

At the time, Hunstein said she often hears from juvenile court judges who are frustrated they have few options under the current system other than incarceration for petty thieves and other repeat criminals who need counseling.

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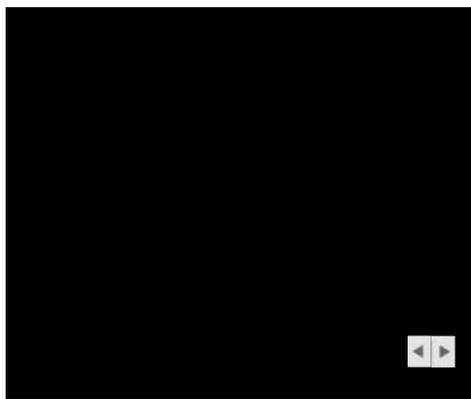


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