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## Georgia can lead again on juvenile justice reform

articles

by Newt Gingrich & Kelly McCutchen  
Columnists

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Years of profound dysfunction in Washington have eroded Americans' confidence in government. Our national leaders have lost virtually all their credibility when it comes to addressing society's most pressing challenges. Fortunately, just as our Founders intended, states are increasingly finding innovative policy solutions for many of these problems.

Our home state of Georgia, for example, took the initiative to apply conservative principles of limited government, transparency, individual liberty and personal responsibility to reform of our criminal justice system last year. Voting unanimously, the legislature adopted a comprehensive package of cost-saving, common-sense policy changes signed into law by Gov. Deal.

Can you imagine Congress ever accomplishing such a feat?

Now Georgia has the opportunity to apply those same conservative convictions to its juvenile justice system by adopting the recommendations of the Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform. After months of research, the bipartisan council has produced a set of proposals that will stop wasteful government spending and help more of Georgia's young offenders fulfill their promise to lead productive, law-abiding lives.

As legislators consider these proposals in the coming months, they should be mindful of three key goals that must be met to ensure juvenile justice reform is a success in our state.

- First, Georgia must do a better job deciding which of our youth offenders belong in secure facilities. These facilities are extraordinarily expensive — more than \$90,000 per bed per year — yet nearly two-thirds of juveniles are found guilty of a new offense within three years of being discharged. By any measure,



that is a disastrous return on our investment, and it is simply unacceptable, both for taxpayers and for public safety.

The solution is to focus our secure facilities on higher risk, serious offenders and place others in community-based programs better suited to their criminal behavior and their needs. This strategy would not only save Georgia \$85 million by 2018, but would also better protect communities and produce brighter futures for our youth.

- Along with smarter placement of young offenders, we must give judges and other court officials the most sophisticated tools available to aid them in deciding individual cases. Risk and needs

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assessment tools — critical to evaluating a juvenile's risk of reoffending and treatment needs — are simply not being used to their full potential in Georgia today.

Without such tools, our judges and other officials often lack sufficient information to make appropriate decisions. It's unfair and unwise to ask judges to make these vital decisions without proven assessment tools, and doing so can lead to inappropriate placements — bad news for offenders and the safety of our streets.

• Finally, Georgia needs to expand and improve proven community programs for our less serious, lower-risk youth. How? By reducing the number of lower-risk youth sent to expensive secure facilities, the state will generate savings that can be invested in community options with a proven track record.

This is not a new or outlandish idea. As states such as Texas, Ohio and Illinois have shown, diverting the right young offenders into suitable community placements can save money and safeguard neighborhoods by reducing the likelihood such juveniles will continue a life of crime.

As signatories of the national Right on Crime initiative, we support policies that focus the lens of accountability on all parts of government, and criminal justice is no exception.

Thanks to the council's work, Georgia has a golden opportunity to harness conservative ideals to produce a more efficient, more effective, and more fiscally responsible juvenile justice system.

*Newt Gingrich is the former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. He represented Georgia's 6th congressional district from 1979 until 1999. Kelly McCutchen is president and CEO of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, a free market think tank based in Atlanta. Both are signatories of Right on Crime.*

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