

Ohio Changing Youthful Inmate Release Program

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) -- Almost as soon as children arrive in detention, the state would begin discussing the best way to release some of them, under a plan announced Thursday aimed at overhauling the juvenile system.

The plan filed in federal court shifts the approach of releasing a child away from rigid sentencing requirements to a plan that follows a youth's progress during imprisonment. The goal: to make sure decisions about releases are fair, consistent and that youth aren't being held in prison longer than needed.

The plan is part of negotiations that followed a 2004 lawsuit alleging serious problems with Ohio's juvenile detention system, including excessive force by guards.

The state should evaluate every youth entering the juvenile system to determine if he is eligible for a speedy release and promote opportunities for early release based on a child's behavior and security classification, according to the plan.

Tom Stickrath, director of the Department of Youth Services, said he has heard for years from parents, lawyers, judges and others that the release system was too complex.

"There seemed to be a lot of uncertainty with the process, inconsistency with the process," Stickrath said Thursday.

Decisions "regarding release should evaluate positive steps taken by the youth toward successful re-entry as well as factor in public safety," the plan says.

Those steps would include good behavior and following detention center rules, and sticking to a treatment plan, such as attending drug treatment classes.

The plan announced Thursday will also spell out consequences if a youth fails to meet his responsibilities, according to the court document.

The state must also review release options within three months of a youth being returned to detention for a parole violation.

About a third of youth held in state juvenile facilities return to prison after a year and almost half within three years. And research shows time in custody can contribute to whether a youth commits another crime.

That's why the plan pays special attention to steps the state can take to help a youth get out as early as possible, said Al Gerhardstein, a Cincinnati attorney who helped negotiate the new process.

"We're trying to match what we know will reduce the likelihood of re-offending with what they're doing in the facilities," he said.

The next step is addressing mandatory sentencing laws that too often hold juveniles in facilities without proof the extra time leads to rehabilitation, Gerhardstein said.

The Department of Youth Services settled a lawsuit last April by agreeing to spend as much as \$30 million in additional annual spending and hiring more than 100 extra guards.

The state also agreed to hire additional psychologists, nurses, social workers and teachers, improve its off-hours programs for children and revamp its program for sex offenders.

The settlement ended legal challenges that began in 2004 with allegations of excessive force being used against girls at the Scioto Juvenile Correctional Facility.