

## ***The Columbus Dispatch***

State to close 4th juvenile prison, end local program

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By Alan Johnson

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Call it the Incredible Shrinking State Agency.

The Ohio Department of Youth Services continues to downsize, having closed three facilities and a regional parole office, and reduced its staff by 300 (13.5 percent) in the past two years.

In September, another facility will close: the Ohio River Valley Juvenile Correctional Facility in Scioto County. Some employees plan a rally Saturday in Franklin Furnace, Ohio, to protest the decision to close it.

Cutbacks will hit closer to home, too, with the end of the Franklin County Community Based Treatment program as of June 30. The program, with a \$1.4 million budget and space for 12 youths at Starr Columbus (formerly the Hannah Neil Center for Children), was started in 2009 as an alternative for low-risk youths. Youth Services officials have determined that the money can be best spent on alternative services.

Most significant statistically: The total number of youths held by the state is less than half what it was as recently as three years ago.

Going back 10 years, DYS had 10 facilities and 1,949 youth inmates. Today, it has five (soon to be four) facilities housing 736 offenders, a 62 percent drop.

In many ways, the agency, through the RECLAIM Ohio program, is doing what the adult prison system, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, wants to do: shrink by diverting offenders to less-restrictive and lower-cost community treatment facilities.

The agency's proposed two-year budget of about \$410 million is \$41 million less than the previous budget, Martha L. Spohn, interim director, told members of the Ohio House Finance and Appropriations Commission on Monday.

"The decreased facility population has been possible because of investment in community alternatives," she said. "The higher-risk youth served in the facilities need and receive a range of services ... including education, health, mental health, sex-offender programming, substance-abuse treatment and recreation.

"The careful balance of supporting facilities and community alternatives is the agency's priority for ongoing reform."

The agency still financially supports more than 130,000 juvenile offenders in 650 programs. However, fewer are being committed to the state for incarceration. In 2000, 21 percent of juvenile felony offenders were sent to DYS facilities; last year, that dropped to 12.8 percent.

Although shrinkage was planned, the state's hand was forced by a federal lawsuit that established a 13-member monitoring team to oversee medical, mental-health, dental and education programs, plus procedures to handle "resistant youth," including isolation.

Spohn told legislators that what was once a troubled agency facing "serious issues" is being transformed into "a model for the country."