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Task force looks a juvenile justice costs, outcomes

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Ward

MONTGOMERY – The state and local communities allocate tens of millions of dollars a year on services for at-risk youth and juvenile offenders, but officials say they’re not sure it’s being spent in ways that are most beneficial to the children and teens served.

The new Alabama Task Force on At-Risk Children wants to look at how various state and local agencies are serving these young people, and what could be done better – and perhaps for less money.

Steven Lafreniere is executive director of the Alabama Department of Youth Services and a task force member. He’s hoping the group will come up with a detailed analysis of how children in the state are entering juvenile programs and the services they’re receiving.

“Taxpayers are spending a lot of money on services to children -- whether they are educational, child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health -- millions and millions of dollars are being spent. I don’t believe that we stop and look at, with data and information, how effective our services are,” Lafreniere said Monday.

“A child may make educational progress while they’re in the Department of Youth Services,” he said. “But I don’t know how that continues once they’ve left. Did they go back to school? There’s no way to mark the progress we’ve made.”

Sen. Vivian Figures, D-Mobile, is chairwoman of the task force.

“We’re trying to come up with a masterplan to help the children that are already in the juvenile and criminal justice systems so

they can come out and be successful,” Figures said.

Another task force goal is to identify changes that can be made to keep children from entering the system.

For data collection and recommendations, the task force is looking to The Pew Charitable Trusts Public Safety Performance Project, which has worked on reform in other states. LeShunda Hill, of Pew, told the task force that reform passed in Georgia in 2013 is supposed to save that state \$85 million during a five-year period.

Hill said that in other states, Pew found that teens are often in residential centers when they could be receiving services without being removed from their homes. Many of them weren't a public safety threat, and community-based care, instead of residential facilities, is less expensive.

According to the Alabama Department of Youth Service's 2015 annual report, it had about 1,400 teens in its care that year. A little more than 500 of them had committed a technical violation, similar to a probation violation.

Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, said that unlike the adult correctional system, services for at-risk youth vary greatly from county to county.

“Shelby County, which has a super system because they can afford it, is very different than say Bibb County, which is right next door,” Ward said. “Morgan County is going to be very different than Colbert County, just because the funding is more locally based than state based. So, in the past, traditionally, it's been hard to come up with a juvenile justice reform package because it's different from jurisdiction to jurisdiction; you get into a lot of turf wars and you get into a lot of funding issues.

“But states that have taken it on and tackled it have shown that it pays off big time in dividends for your state corrections system. Once they become adults, there's a lot less recidivism because you've tackled it early.”

The task force's original objective was to have recommendations to the Legislature early next year, but that deadline on Monday was pushed to 2018.

Ebony Howard, an attorney and juvenile justice policy specialist for the Southern Poverty Law Center, attended the task force's meeting. She said those in the Department of Youth Service's custody may also be in the Department of Human Resource's custody, and they could also be receiving services from the Department of Mental Health. She'd like to see data-driven mapping of what resources are available.

"Ultimately, I'd like to see a reform package that's geared at keeping kids out of the system unnecessarily, holding kids accountable when they engage in bad acts, but then trying to give them an opportunity for growth and to go on and become productive adults," Howard said.

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