

State Agrees to Close Four Juvenile Facilities: A Partial Yet Significant Victory for New York's Youth

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In January, New York's Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) announced plans to close six youth correctional facilities as part of a larger effort to reform the state's juvenile justice system. The agency proposed closing the Adirondack Wilderness Challenge in Clinton County, Auburn Residential Center in Cayuga County, Brace Residential Center in Delaware County, Gloversville Group Home in Fulton County, Great Valley Residential Center in Cattaraugus County, and the Pyramid Reception Center in The Bronx.

The main reason for closing OCFS facilities is that they are ineffective. A New York State study found that nearly 80% of young people released from OCFS facilities are re-arrested within three years. In contrast, community-based alternative-to-incarceration programs, particularly those that use "evidence-based practices, such a family functional therapy and multi-systemic therapy, have proven much more successful in reducing recidivism rates among court-involved youth.

In proposing the closure of these facilities, OCFS Commissioner Gladys Carrión recognized that her agency could invest the \$16 million the state currently spends to operate these facilities in more effective community-based alternatives. "Instead of continuing to pour money into this broken system and confining these children to facilities hundreds of miles from their homes, OCFS has aggressively been moving toward more community-based alternatives to incarceration where these children can maintain and strengthen connections with their families and the significant adults in their lives," Commissioner Carrion stated in a January press release.

The six facilities slated for closure in January were operating well below capacity. For example, despite having 25 beds each, the Great Valley and Brace facilities housed 11 children and 2 children, respectively. The Auburn facility and the Gloversville facility were both completely empty. The cost to operate one bed in an OCFS facility is \$140,000 to \$200,000 a year.

However, despite the fact that the OCFS facilities are underutilized, costly and ineffective, the New York State Senate fought hard to keep the facilities open. On March 12, the Senate's budget bill proposed keeping open three facilities: Great Valley, Brace and Auburn. In response, the Juvenile Justice Coalition coordinated an intense media and advocacy campaign to urge the closure of all six OCFS facilities. As a result of the Coalition's efforts, the issue

received widespread news coverage and editorial support, including articles and editorials in the *New York Times*, the *Albany Times Union*, the *Buffalo News*, the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, the *Syracuse Post-Standard*, NPR radio, and other media outlets across the state.

A few days before the state budget deadline, the Juvenile Justice Coalition organized an emergency Advocacy Day to urge the Legislature to close all six OCFS facilities. On March 26, over 50 young people and other advocates travelled to Albany to hold a press conference and meet with legislators and their aides. During the subsequent budget negotiations, the closures became a bargaining chip between the two houses, and after much wrangling, Governor Paterson and the Legislature restored budget funding for two of the facilities: Great Valley and Pyramid. While the Juvenile Justice Coalition strongly supported closing all six facilities, this resolution is nevertheless a victory for advocates, for youth involved in the juvenile justice system, and for an agency attempting to remake itself.