

December 21, 2010

Bloomberg Makes a Proposal on Youth Prisons

By RUSS BUETTNER

NY Times

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said Tuesday that he would ask New York State to turn over control of prisons and services for juvenile offenders to local governments, a move that he said would end the failed and costly practice of shipping troubled young people from New York City to upstate facilities far from their families.

Mr. Bloomberg also said that he planned to pursue changes to state law that would allow the rapid closing of large detention centers that are mostly empty but fully staffed.

He said that keeping children close to home and in the least restrictive setting that is appropriate would help reduce the “entirely unacceptable” recidivism rates: 81 percent of boys in the system return within three years of their release.

“This turnstile kind of in-and-out does not serve anybody,” the mayor said during a news conference at City Hall. “It keeps us less safe than we need to be. It is phenomenally costly, and it certainly doesn’t do anything to help people get their lives back on track.”

The state’s troubled juvenile justice system has been under siege of late.

Last year, a state task force reported that young people battling addiction or mental illness received little counseling and were often abused by violent offenders. In July, the state agreed to place four of its most dangerous youth prisons under federal oversight.

But Mr. Bloomberg’s proposal will most likely face resistance. For upstate lawmakers, the juvenile prisons represent well-paying jobs in struggling areas. The union for most of those workers, the New York State Public Employees Federation, successfully advocated for a change to state law in 2006 that required a year’s notice before facilities could be closed. A union spokeswoman said Tuesday that the union would oppose Mr. Bloomberg’s request for that law to be thrown out.

One state official said the mayor’s proposal for returning offenders to the city could drain money from the programs for juvenile offenders elsewhere in the state, leaving them without resources for detention and services. About 60 percent of the young people incarcerated are from New York City.

“We would have to send upstate kids downstate,” said the official, who would speak only anonymously because he did not know what position Governor-elect Andrew M. Cuomo would take on the matter. “We don’t want to create unintended consequences.”

Leaders in the State Senate and the Assembly said they had not yet seen the proposals and could not comment.

But recent struggles on related issues suggest that the mayor could face opposition in Albany. During the last legislative session, Gov. David A. Paterson proposed rescinding the state law that requires 12 months' notification before closing facilities, even when they are empty. But the Legislature did not act.

And Dean G. Skelos, the State Senate Republican leader, recently told the Newsday editorial board that prisons should not be closed without a plan in place to provide jobs within the community.

Mr. Bloomberg said he had not yet spoken with Mr. Cuomo about the proposal. A spokesman for Mr. Cuomo declined to comment.

During his campaign, Mr. Cuomo released a plan for improving the juvenile justice system and consolidating additional underused prisons. He recently toured the Tryon Residential Center for Boys in Johnstown to highlight what he views as wasteful spending there.

Sixteen state juvenile prisons have been closed since 2007 by the Office of Children and Family Services. Two others are scheduled to close in January.

The state bills local governments for half of the cost of incarcerating children from their areas. Last year, for an average daily headcount of 569 offenders, the city was billed nearly \$62 million, the mayor said.

Even though headcounts have dropped by two-thirds over the last decade, the total amount the city pays has increased because the per diem rates charged by the state include the costs of maintaining and staffing largely empty facilities. The mayor's proposal, reported in The Daily News on Tuesday, also seeks a change to the rate structure.

Of the 25 facilities, 13 are more than half-empty. Last month, the city filed a lawsuit seeking to prevent the state from charging it to maintain and staff underused facilities.

On Tuesday, the mayor promoted two city-run programs for young offenders that he said had shown low rates of recidivism and helped children return to their homes through intensive supervision and therapy.

"New York City has shown how to do far better ourselves," Mr. Bloomberg said. "We have produced consistently better outcomes for young people in the juvenile justice system, far more cost-effectively."

In a lawsuit filed last year, the Legal Aid Society contended that children in the state facilities were being physically restrained in inappropriate ways and that they were not receiving sufficient services.

Tamara Steckler, who leads the Legal Aid Society's juvenile rights division, said the organization would support the mayor's proposal.

"It makes sense at this point," she said, "when New York City is willing to take this kid back within its own jurisdiction."