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Judge Warns Budget Cuts “Will Have a Crippling Effect on Juvenile Justice in Georgia.”

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Sep 19, 2010



Many people charged with carrying out juvenile justice in Georgia are concerned about how new state budget cuts will affect children, communities, and the system overall.

“I just fear that there’s going to be less policing done on juvenile behavior,” says **Early County Sheriff Jimmy Murkerson**, of **Governor Sonny Perdue’s** recent order that the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and other state agencies amend their 2011 budget proposals with plans for four, six and eight percent cuts.

“The general public seems to feel that [law enforcement] should be handling every offense from sagging pants to curfew violations, but you’ve got to have the manpower to address these minor issues. With these cuts that manpower just won’t be there.”

Gwinnett County Juvenile Judge Stephen Franzen echoes a similar sentiment.

“Our ability to respond to the needs of kids and the community is going to be severely damaged,” he says. “Child welfare is consistently underfunded in Georgia, but there’s no fat here. Now we’re just whittling away at the services provided to Georgia’s children. This will have a crippling affect on juvenile justice in Georgia.”

The governor says the budget cut mandates were necessary due to massive state budget shortfalls. The **Georgia Budget & Policy Institute at Georgia State University** predicts the state budget deficit is between \$413 million and \$613 million. That’s on the heels of \$2.5 billion in budget cuts already implemented since the 2009 fiscal year.

Governor Perdue’s Director of Communications **Bert Brantley** has told **JJIE.org** that Governor Perdue is woefully aware that the cuts will have some impact, but Perdue must also adhere to his fiscal responsibilities.

“Will this have an impact on those who receive services from these agencies,” he says. “Definitely. But we also have a balance budget requirement that we cannot avoid. We cannot spend any more than we take in.”

Public defenders, human services and juvenile justice – all agencies that provide direct services and support to young people in the state – were among the agencies that submitted proposals by Sept. 1.

The proposed **worst case scenario** changes include:

- Closing four detention centers eliminating more than 250 beds
- Eliminating 106 beds in contracted residential treatment programs
- Terminating the contracts of four community service providers
- Reducing community programs and services for juveniles
- Increasing class sizes from 15 to 20 in nine Regional Detention Centers
- Slashing staff overtime work
- Furlough days for all DJJ staff

- Reducing administrative positions, including some core to the agency

Murkerson and many other frontline workers say they’re especially concerned about the impact that closing Regional Youth Detention Centers (RYDCs) will have on juvenile delinquency and deprivation cases. Although the Blakely, GA facility (now located across the street from the county jail) is not currently slated to close, Murkerson says such closures would have major repercussions in his and other rural communities.

“I’m not sure where we would end up having to take them, maybe Albany, Thomasville, Columbus,” says Murkerson of his force, made up of 25 sworn officers. “In some cases that’s two hours going and two hours coming back. That’s a total of four hours that my deputies would be gone just to get them [the juvenile] to a detention hearing. It’s going to be so labor-intensive just to get them to a facility. It’s almost not worth it for taxpayer dollars to be spent transporting juveniles for minor offenses.”

It’s an option, Murkerson says, that is not practical.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that many officers aren’t going to be as aggressive with policing juveniles unless there’s a flagrant violation of the law,” he says. “They’re going to be very reluctant to pursue juvenile offenders. Being aggressive on the street costs money. The question is: can we, in light of the economy, afford to address the issues that the general public says we should be responsible for?”

Newly appointed **DJJ Commissioner Garland Hunt** is more optimistic. He says it will require hard work, but juvenile justice should not be undercut.

“While we certainly empathize with their challenges, we cannot expect [law enforcement officers] not to do their jobs,” says Hunt, who was appointed to the post in May. “All of them are being stretched and we are doing all that we can to make this transition as easy as possible for them.”

Franzen of Gwinnett County echoes Murkerson’s views.

“I think it’s going to be a disaster; but we’ll see what happens,” he says. “They’re proposing to close the Gwinnett facility. That’s 49 beds. It might seem like a miniscule amount when you think about the fact that we’re a county of 750,000 people in a huge metro area. It’s still some place to bring them. We may cut costs here, but it will be at the expense of public safety.”

Adds Franzen of the proposed RYDC closings:

“If they’re going to be warehoused hundreds of miles away it’s going to make a difference in our ability to administer justice.”

Critics of the budget cut mandates have also raised concerns about whether the closings could eventually cause overcrowding in RYDCs and Youth Development Centers (YDCs) – the very problems that several years ago led to the system’s monitoring by the United States Department of Justice. Hunt emphatically says “no.”

“Let’s stress that we have no intention of going back to any federal supervision again, but we will need legislative help to manage the cuts we’re facing,” he says. “We’re already beginning a dialogue with lawmakers in advance of the next legislative session.”

DJJ Deputy Commissioner Rob Rosenbloom says operating unconstitutional facilities is not an option.

“The facilities that remain will have the staff and programs needed to run Constitutional facilities,” he says. “We hope to be able to minimize and manage the number of kids who need to be in our facilities. We will also explore alternatives to detention options for low level offenders such as ankle bracelet monitoring or strict supervision.”

Although admittedly more optimistic about DJJs ability to operate effectively and justly with fewer resources, Hunt admits he’s concerned about the impact of proposed job cuts. Meantime, members of his staff, including **Commissioner of Programs and Support Services Amy Howell**, are already mapping out plans suggested in the budget proposals.

“We’ve been notifying teachers and letting them know about the changes (in class size) and working with them,” she says. “We’re shifting into a more hands-on approach from our teachers in the classroom, from a more self-directed approach. This will require more from our teachers, but we don’t feel it will have an impact as far as the quality of instruction.”

Hunts says operating with fewer resources will require better coordination among agencies, including exploring ways to streamline all processes, including the ways in which youth are transported to and from detention centers.

“We’ll have to change the way we do business and manage our resources even better,” says Hunt.

Murkerson adds that having more support from school systems could help to ease the burden often placed on law enforcement.

“Schools are going to have to handle more issues in-house, as opposed to putting so much into the juvenile courts,” he says. “That’s one way to address some of these problems.”

As for Hunt, he insists that a collaborative approach, like the ideas discussed last week at a juvenile justice forum hosted by the **Governor’s Office for Children and Families** is the key to success.

“We want everyone to realize that we’re not the bad guys, we’re doing all of this because we have to,” he says. “That’s why we’re doing all we can to utilize the resources that we have. Everybody has to play a part. We need the officers, we need the judges; we need everyone to make this work.”

Got a juvenile justice story idea? Contact JJIE.org staff writer Chandra R. Thomas at cthom141@kennesaw.edu. Thomas, a former Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow and Kiplinger Public Affairs Journalism Fellow, is an award-winning multimedia journalist who has worked for Atlanta Magazine and Fox 5 News in Atlanta.



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