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DJJ Unveils Severe Budget Cuts: Is There A Silver Lining?

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Aug 27, 2010

By Chandra R. Thomas

Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice Board members say there's possibly a silver lining to the proposed 2011 budget cuts released today. They say despite the many challenges the cuts raise, there's great potential for positive outcomes from the reductions recently mandated by Governor Sonny Perdue, but they're mostly contingent on legislative support.



Board members unanimously passed **Deputy Commissioner Jeff Minor's** suggested budget changes Thursday during a meeting at the department's Decatur headquarters. The reductions, some say, could ultimately force Georgia leaders – from the governor to state legislators – to reassess which young people get locked up and for how long. Such changes could eventually reduce the number of low-risk children being held in youth detention centers.

“These are serious cuts that are going to have a very serious impact on a lot of people,” says Minor, of the plan he contends that he and his team spent “hours and hours” drafting. “We need to get the word out about that.”

Perdue has ordered DJJ to develop proposals cutting this year's budget by four, six and eight percent.

Here are some of the worst case scenario proposals:

- Closure of four detention centers eliminating more than 250 beds
- Eliminate 106 beds in contracted residential treatment programs
- Terminate the contracts of four community service providers
- Reduce community programs and services for juveniles
- Increase class sizes from 15 to 20 in nine Regional Detention Centers
- Slash staff overtime work
- Implement furlough days for all DJJ staff
- Reduce administrative positions, including some core to the agency

Minor's presentation was in response to Perdue's recent order that DJJ and other state agencies amend their 2011 budget proposals by Sept. 1, due to massive budget shortfalls. The **Georgia Budget & Policy Institute at Georgia State University** predicts the state budget shortfall is between \$413 million and \$613 million. That's on the heels of \$2.5 billion in budget cuts already implemented since the 2009 financial year.

The governor's mandate not only requires each affected agency to find budget cuts for the fiscal year of 2011, but may also require cuts as high as 10 percent in 2012. The judicial branch, public defender, human services and juvenile justice – all agencies that provide direct services and support to young people in the state – are on the list. The Department of Education was instructed to plan for a two percent budget cut.



“We’ve seen \$102 million cut out of our base budget in the last three years,” adds Minor, of DJJ. “That’s about 38 percent in three years. The thought of getting to 10 percent again is daunting.”

Earlier this month Governor Perdue’s Director of Communications Bert Brantley told **JJIE** that although the governor is well aware that the budget cuts will have an impact on those who receive services from the affected agencies, he also has a balance budget requirement that could not be avoided. “We cannot spend any more than we take in,” says Brantley.

Board member Stephen Simpson says he hopes Minor’s report will encourage Governor Perdue to abandon DJJ cuts, or at least limit them to four percent.

“I’m hoping he will look at the consequences and see that with anything more than minor cuts, children will suffer,” he says.

Board members say the severe cuts could increase more community collaborations and put pressure on lawmakers to draft and pass bills that would maintain public safety while decreasing the number of low-risk juveniles behind bars.

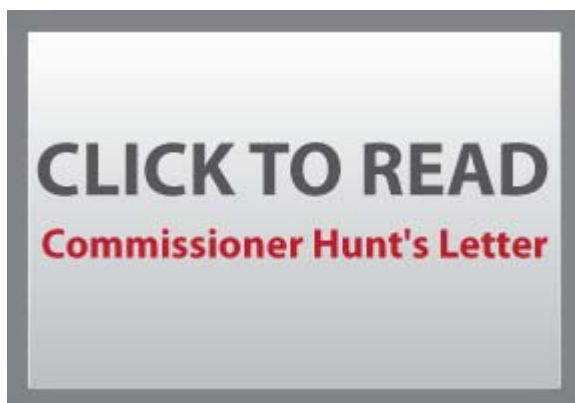
“If we have to lose these beds, let’s talk about who’s in them and who needs to be,” says Minor. “I’ve said it before. We will not operate unconstitutional facilities in Georgia again. With these cuts we could be forced into doing that.”

The agency plans to formally reach out to lawmakers to suggest legislative changes that could alleviate some systemic problems, including:

- Placing population caps in secure facilities
- Limiting the number of low-risk juvenile offenders that are housed
- Giving juvenile judges more authority to modify sentences
- Allowing detained youth who do well to earn credit for early release
- Housing juveniles charged as adults in county jails, away from adults

“There could be some positive changes and there’s not a lot of legislation out there that supports youth in this respect,” says DJJ Finance Committee Chair Daniel Menefee. “This provides an opportunity to look at these options like early release programs for those who fulfill their obligations instead of them just waiting on their time [to lapse].”

Adds Minor: “What we’re basically saying is with this reduction of beds that there is an opportunity for a conversation to be had about who needs to be in these beds. The worst thing you can do is to lock up a kid who doesn’t need to be there. It sets them on a cycle that is hard to stop once it starts.”



DJJ Commissioner Garland Hunt says in light of the cuts, he welcomes more collaboration with community “stakeholders,” including legislators, prosecutors and law enforcement agencies.

“We will reach out to see how we can work together,” he says. “We are hoping to bring in new allies since the cuts have been so severe. Our desire is to rehabilitate the youth in our facilities.”

Board member Sandra Taylor agrees.

“Legislators don’t need to know that children are our future; they already know that,” she says. “What we need to do is provide them with the information behind the impact of these cuts. It’s our responsibility as an agency to keep that in the forefront of their thoughts.”

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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[Amad Canders](#)

October 11, 2010 | 10:05 am

I work for the Department of Juvenile Justice. I just want to leave this comment. Has anyone ever given it a thought to keep the important juvenile facilities around. Education is the key to youth giving back to society. Let’s really think of the mission statement, that’s embedded in all juvenile facilities. Please, examine what you all are doing to these juvenile offenders.
