

Setting record straight on juvenile detention facilities

By SHERIFF BEN JOHNSON | Special to the Tampa Tribune

Housing Florida's juvenile offenders in secure detention facilities is a challenging task that has resulted in an ever-increasing price tag for county governments that are struggling to fund essential services and balance budgets. Fortunately, there's a better way.

Florida's sheriffs have a long history of safely and securely housing prisoners in local jail systems operated across the state with great efficiency and professionalism. And every day, sheriffs house youths in adult jails — youths who are charged as adults due to the severity of their crimes. This experience makes us uniquely qualified and well-positioned to assume the responsibility of housing all pre-adjudicated youth.

In fact, for counties that choose this option, it's a wise move that will save taxpayers millions of dollars. Just ask Polk County taxpayers, who are expected to realize a savings of about \$1.4 million annually as a result of the county's decision to turn over the housing of pre-trial juvenile offenders to Sheriff Grady Judd.

The Legislature and Gov. Rick Scott acknowledged the wisdom of this type arrangement with last year's passage of SB 2112 authorizing counties to independently operate their own juvenile detention centers. This law gives counties the authority to decide what best fits each community's needs.

Despite overwhelming evidence that it makes good fiscal and operational sense, a recent column by David Utter questions whether turning over the responsibility of housing juvenile offenders to our sheriffs makes sense ("Stop housing juvenile offenders in adult jails," Other Views, Oct. 24). Unfortunately, the column perpetuates several inaccuracies. This is an extremely serious issue that demands transparency and clarity.

By way of background, the situation as it existed prior to the passage of last year's legislation must be understood. In 2004, Florida shifted part of the Department of Juvenile Justice's costs for state-operated juvenile detention centers to county governments. Unfortunately, the state maintained complete control over how the detention centers were operated and how the money was spent. That resulted in an unsatisfactory arrangement in which counties were required to help underwrite the state's costs but given no input into how the facilities were administered.

Meanwhile, the cost to the counties continued to rise exponentially, consuming an increasingly larger share of the local tax burden. In Polk, taxpayers were paying an average of \$237 per day to the state for every pre-adjudicated juvenile offender housed in the state detention facility serving their county. The per-day cost was projected to rise this year to \$286 and the following year to a whopping \$350. Fortunately for taxpayers, Sheriff Judd is now operating the juvenile detention center at one-third to one-half of the costs under the state.

Utter's concerns regarding the sheriffs' operations of local juvenile detention facilities generally fall into three categories: training, experience and operating standards.

Utter questions whether sheriffs' detention staffs have the necessary expertise to properly handle children. Sheriffs' correctional officers are highly trained for the job. Using Polk as an example, their detention deputies have received extensive training, development and education, making them extremely well-equipped to provide a higher level of care and custody at a much lower cost.

A Polk County Sheriff's Office detention deputy working in juvenile custody areas will have a minimum 832 hours of training, in addition to 39 hours of re-training every year, plus mandatory state Department of Law Enforcement re-training and other optional training. This compares to DJJ's minimum requirement of 240 hours of training for their detention officers.

Next is the issue of experience. Again, this is a false issue. As already stated, housing juveniles in county jails isn't new in Florida. Sheriffs have been safely and securely housing youths in adult jails for decades. The only difference under the new law is that sheriffs can additionally house youthful offenders who will be proceeding through the juvenile court system.

Looking at the issue of operating standards, Utter suggests that the Florida Sheriffs Association's jail standards for juveniles are inadequate and reject requirements to protect children and treat them differently than adults. This simply isn't the case. In fact, the new legislation requires local juvenile facilities to be inspected annually and abide by guidelines established by the Florida Model Jail Standards. This requirement prompted the development of a new chapter within the Florida Model Jail Standards that outlines the standards for juveniles housed in youth detention facilities. Federal regulations also require sight and sound separation between youth and adults, guaranteeing that youthful detainees won't interact with adult inmates.

Other federal regulations require separate transportation, programming and staff for youth and adults in detention facilities. In addition, each sheriff or county choosing to operate a juvenile detention facility must be accredited through the Florida Corrections Accreditation Commission or the American Corrections Association. As Judd correctly noted, accreditation is vitally important to the integrity of an organization because these are outside, independent professionals who compare an agency's procedures with those deemed to be the industry's best practices.

While not mandatory yet, it's worth noting that DJJ has submitted a legislative budget request that's predicated on requiring counties to operate juvenile detention. The reason is obvious: DJJ clearly recognizes that sheriffs run these centers safely, effectively and efficiently.

We realize this is a complex and emotional issue for child advocates and others. However, any objective look at the facts and issues related to cost, standards, training and experience shows that Florida sheriffs' staffs are well-equipped to meet the detention requirements of court-ordered youthful offenders in a safe, professional and cost-effective manner.

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