



Chicago Tribune
chicagotribune.com

You are here: Chicago Tribune / Archives / 2007 > June > 06 > Opinion

Archives: Opinion
Archive for Wednesday, June 06, 2007

Cook County chaos

June 06, 2007

The Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center is out of control. Children languish there like warehoused animals, while millions of dollars are wasted on do-nothing jobs filled by unqualified workers and patronage stooges.... Kids live in filthy surroundings, with little guidance, under the supervision of workers whose behaviors cheat the residents even more than they cheat Cook County taxpayers. That's how this page described Cook County's juvenile center in August 2005. Nothing has changed since then.

In the last two years a slew of experts has detailed that the facility, which houses children ages 10 to 17 who are accused of crimes, remains plagued by filth, professional incompetence and dangerous conditions. Children at the center face "an alarming risk of suicide and inadequate mental health services" and "a climate of fear and violence," say attorneys who represent them. Kids are beaten by staff members and other kids. Attorneys point to "a culture of chaos and incompetence" and "a persistent failure to provide basic necessities."

More than four years ago, the federal court mandated a step-by-step plan to rescue the juvenile center. Cook County leaders agreed to that plan, but they have utterly failed to honor the agreement. And now things have reached a perilous state.

Last week, the American Civil Liberties Union asked U.S. District Judge John Nordberg to place the juvenile center in receivership. That's a severe step, but a necessary one.

A receiver would likely be granted greater authority over budget matters, contracts and hiring and firing. A receiver could break the stranglehold that patronage politics has had on the place. A receiver could rescue the kids who live amid rodents, the kids who suffer from mental illnesses and can't get medications.

The request for receivership comes at an awkward time. The Illinois legislature has just approved a bill that would take control of the center away from Cook County Board President Todd Stroger and turn it over to Tim Evans, chief judge of the Circuit Court. We support the bill and hope the governor signs it. But it wouldn't go into effect until January at the earliest. That's too long a time to wait. The situation is too immediate and too dire.

The latest evidence:

In recent months, the center's medical services accreditation has been revoked.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which has national expertise in juvenile justice, dispatched several consultants to work with facility leaders to improve the place. But the foundation has now dropped out, citing the futility of the effort.

In the last year, the center has had three superintendents – all three failed. People who had the expertise

and experience to bring changes at the center were canned by Stroger. Yet he kept in place unqualified political appointees like Maria Moreno Szafarczyk, sister of county Commissioner Joseph Mario Moreno. So change is needed right now.

Eventually, the center will come under the control of the Circuit Court. But the appointment of a receiver would get quick results and buy time for Judge Evans and his aides to get up to speed on the problems there, to learn from the experts who have been evaluating the place for years.

At a hearing in federal court Thursday, Nordberg suggested he understood the urgency here. We hope he acts quickly on that understanding.

Related articles

- Cook juvenile facility chief pleads for more staffing Apr 07, 2008
 - Judge Nordberg, enough! May 02, 2008
 - Kids in lockup need care of pros, not pols Dec 08, 2006
 - Recruiting a savior May 23, 2007
 - Nordberg's bold decision May 14, 2008
-