

# The Morning News

## Local News for Northwest Arkansas

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### State Senator Wants Juvenile Prison Shut Down

By [Rose Ann Pearce](#)  
*The Morning News*

SPRINGDALE - If Sen. Sue Madison had her way, the Arkansas Juvenile Assessment and Treatment Center in Alexander would be closed and bulldozed.

She called the juvenile prison in southwest Pulaski County a "grim" place while discussing child welfare issues during a meeting of the Arkansas Kids Count Coalition on Thursday.

It's a place where the state is "warehousing juveniles because someone is mad at them, either the juvenile judge or school officials," Madison said.

The state's challenge is finding the money to replace the treatment programs with community-based programs that are more effective, she said.

Reform of Arkansas' juvenile justice system is one of a laundry list of issues the Coalition supports to improve the welfare of children across the state, said Paul Kelly, a senior policy analyst with Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families.

The juvenile justice system relies too heavily on confined incarceration of children who may have family or mental health issues rather than criminal behavior.

The Kids Count Coalition recommends greater attention on preventive measures, placing children in smaller therapeutic environments and expanded community services to better serve children rather than shipping them off to secure confinement, away from their schools or families.

Madison, a Fayetteville Democrat, was joined by Reps. Jim House, D-Fayetteville; Lindsley Smith, D-Fayetteville; and Mark Martin, R-Prairie Grove, as well as representatives-elect Debbie Hobbs of Rogers and Uvalde Lindsey of Fayetteville.

The meeting was one of four statewide to raise awareness about how to keep Arkansas families moving forward.

Discussion also centered on child welfare, child health, early childhood care and education and economic self-sufficiency.

## FAST FACTS

Issues

The Arkansas Kids Count Coalition says numerous issues affecting children's welfare in Arkansas need attention from state legislators, including:

- 182 children in Benton County and 164 children in Washington County were removed from their homes from April 2007 to March 2008 and placed in foster care because of neglect or abuse.
- 77 percent of children statewide were involved in neglect allegations, many because of parents going through a stressful period, such as a job loss, limited income or no support system.
- 32 percent of children who were maltreated in 2007 were involved in physical and sexual abuse allegations.
- 11 percent of Arkansas children has no health insurance which accounts for 70,000 children statewide. Of those, 44,000 are eligible for ArKids First state insurance but various barriers, including the number of participating doctors, prevent the program from growing.
- Arkansas sends almost 6,000 children to bed-based care annually rather than treating them in their communities.
- Arkansas children die in motor vehicle accidents at twice the national average.

Source: Arkansas Kids Count Coalition