

# DeWine calls for group to examine problems at youth prisons after newspaper investigation

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**Columbus Dispatch**

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine wants a special working group to examine problems found by an eight-month investigation into Ohio's youth prisons and local juvenile detention centers.

The investigation by The Cincinnati Enquirer, The Columbus Dispatch, Akron Beacon Journal, Canton Repository and other newspapers found the system is overwhelmed by violence and trauma and doesn't have enough employees to provide adequate security, education and mental health treatment for incarcerated children.

Employees and kids are injured – sometimes seriously – in fights and assaults that erupt without warning. Workers are struggling to maintain order and fear for their own safety. Within three years of leaving a state youth prison, four in 10 teens are incarcerated again in either the youth or adult system. And those who don't return to prison face a higher likelihood of dying an early death.

DeWine praised the reporting, saying it shows there is work to be done. "You've highlighted some very horribly tragic stories that I think anybody can relate to. It's now time for a reset, or a re-look, at DYS and the whole system."

Responsibility for running the local juvenile detention centers falls on elected judges while operating the state youth prisons is handled by DeWine's Department of Youth Services director, Amy Ast.

The governor said in an interview Monday that he has confidence in Ast and her team to lead the youth prisons.

That said, he acknowledged that it's time for a thorough review of the youth prisons and local detention centers.

"What I'm hoping this group will do is we'll take a hard look at DYS, how they're running their facilities, looking at every aspect of it - there is no limit to

what they can look at," DeWine said. "I would expect from this group that they'll come back and be very, very candid."

DeWine wants the experts to examine whether the right number of juveniles are housed in youth prisons and "are we doing the best that we can to rehabilitate them, to help them."

The governor said on Monday that the panel will dig into the Ohio Department of Youth Services and examine issues at the local juvenile detention centers, which are operated by elected judges.

DeWine's working group will be led by Tom Stickrath, who formerly led youth services and other state departments, and include juvenile court judges, state lawmakers and others.

Ohio Senate President Matt Huffman, R-Lima, said the stories point out the need for reforms, including looking at sending more kids to smaller, closer-to-home facilities instead of youth prisons.

Huffman added that he'd support requiring centralized reporting of serious incidents - riots, deaths, serious injuries, escapes - that occur at local detention centers.

DeWine said he agrees that centralized reporting is needed. "I'm for it."

## **Democrats demand investigation**

Democratic lawmakers, however, called for more dramatic action.

House Minority Leader Allison Russo, D-Upper Arlington said "This report shows the Ohio Department of Youth Services has failed the hundreds of kids it's meant to rehabilitate and protect, failed their families and failed the hard-working men and women who work at these facilities."

She added: "The governor should immediately investigate the leadership at his DYS and explain to taxpayers how's he going to fix this horrific problem. These kids deserve a chance at rehabilitation, but instead they're being thrown into a broken system where their safety and their future are being discarded."

Senate Minority Leader Nickie Antonio, D-Lakewood, said there needs to be an independent investigation into why Ohio's youth prisons are so violent. That probe should include talking to those who work there. "They have a more dangerous job than I think any of us realize and this just points it out," she said.

"I don't think it makes sense for the administration to investigate themselves or their staff but I think there needs to be a civil rights investigation," Antonio said. "The safety of those kids that are there, as well as the staff, should be something that we're all concerned about."

## **What are juvenile justice experts saying?**

Amy Borrer of The Gault Center, a national advocacy group, said wholesale changes are needed.

"The bottom line is the system doesn't work and we need to look at alternatives. DYS shows time and time again that it is not successful. And frankly, I don't think it can be," said Borrer. "There is a lot of research that says that this idea of taking kids out of their families and communities, housing them in these facilities, it doesn't help and it does hurt."

Borrer suggests long-term investing in community-based services to help families. In the short run, she said Ohio should remove kids from the state prisons and don't accept more unless the prisons are adequately staffed to provide all the legally required services.

Leah Winsberg, senior policy attorney for the Children's Law Center, said juvenile court judges need to expand the use of community-based alternatives, instead of sending children to prison. The Department of Youth Services needs to improve the ratio of staff to kids, hold staff accountable and shift the culture so that inappropriate use of force isn't tolerated, she said.

## **Who is on DeWine's panel?**

Stickrath, a retired state executive who led the departments of public safety and youth, will act as chairman. The panel will also include:

- Tony Capizzi, retired Montgomery County Juvenile Court judge.
- Gabriella Celeste, policy director, Schubert Center for Child Studies.
- Melissa Day, juvenile division chief, Stark County prosecutor.
- Amy Lewis, Greene County juvenile court judge.
- David Stucki, retired Stark County juvenile court judge.
- State Reps. Cindy Abrams, R-Harrison, and Richard Brown, D-Canal Winchester.
- State Sens. Paula Hudson-Hicks, D-Toledo, and Nathan Manning, R-North Ridgeville.