

## New Jersey's juvenile detention centers are fewer and better

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FOR THE STAR-LEDGER Essex County Juvenile Detention Center superintendent Dennis Hughes, right, gives a tour of the facility to county officials, including Passaic freeholder Tahesha Way, left, and Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo Jr., center.

New Jersey has 16 juvenile detention centers around the state, down from 17 in 2006. It may soon have fewer, thanks to alternative programs for young offenders and efforts to save costs by combining facilities.

Passaic County is considering closing its youth house and sending its residents to Essex County. The proposed merger could save Passaic some \$10 million a year, even after it pays more than \$4 million to Essex for the service.

The deal is a win-win for both counties. And behind it is another success story -- the use of court-approved alternative programs such as home monitoring and ankle-bracelet tracking that have reduced the number of juveniles held in the Essex facility.

Not only are these programs less expensive than detention, they are more effective in rehabilitating

youthful offenders, according to the state Office of the Child Advocate.

The alternative programs have left Essex County's juvenile facility in Newark underutilized, with just 115 of its 240 spots for youthful offenders occupied. County officials say there is plenty of room for the 86 young inmates it would receive from the Passaic facility, located in Haledon.

Mary Jo Buchanan, Morris County human services director, said alternative programs also have led to empty beds at its juvenile detention center in Morris Township, so the county has begun to share its youth detention services. Last month, Hunterdon County began sending its youthful offenders to Morris. And Warren County, which spent about \$1.2 million annually to operate a 28-bed youth facility in Oxford, has received state approval to close it and send youthful offenders to Morris County.

The efforts to consolidate have raised concerns. Many of the 148 union employees working in the Passaic County center have expressed fear they could be out of work if they can't land jobs at another facility. Child advocates worry the weak economy and ever-growing property tax burden will pressure some counties to enter into consolidation agreements without having a thoughtful plan in place for alternative juvenile services.

Counties are wise to consider cheaper ways to rehabilitate juvenile offenders. But the effort is not all about money. Essex County has made huge progress in using alternative prevention programs in lieu of juvenile jail. For Passaic, merging with Essex is a step in the right direction.