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Georgia Juvenile Justice Reform Bill a 'Win-Win'

By: [JAMES SWIFT](#) | 20 HOURS AGO



(http://jjie.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/files/2013/05/IMG_0354.jpg)

James Swift / JJIE

Gov. Nathan Deal signs a much-anticipated juvenile justice reform bill into law Thursday.

DALTON, Ga. – “This is a very crucial day in the state of Georgia,” said Gov. Nathan Deal Thursday at the Elbert Shaw Regional Youth Detention Center, where he signed into a massive reform package that rewrites the state’s juvenile code.

House Bill 242 (<http://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/en-US/display/20132014/HB/242>) swept through both chambers of the Georgia General Assembly with unanimous approval (<http://jjie.org/historic-juvenile-justice-reform-bill-to-be-signed-into-law-tomorrow-in-georgia/>) after being introduced in February.

“When I became governor in 2011, I knew that this state could not continue along the path it was traveling in terms of simply locking people up, throwing away the key to some extent, and then hoping for the best,” Deal said at the bill signing event. Alongside HB 349 – a criminal justice reform bill signed by Deal last week (<http://jjie.org/georgia-gov-deal-signs-law-establishing-new-juvenile-justice-reform-commission/>) – the recently enacted HB 242 will help improve outcomes for both offenders and public safety in Georgia, Deal added.

“We believe that this bill [does] some of the very things on the juvenile side that we have tried to do on the adult side,” Deal said. While the criminal justice reforms largely center on the creation of accountability courts and expanding disposition options for judges, the recently enacted juvenile justice reform measures focus on phasing low-level offenders out of the state’s detention facilities.

Deal said that housing juvenile inmates was not only more expensive than housing adult prisoners, but was less effective at reducing recidivism rates. In fact, half of juvenile offenders released in Georgia re-offend within a three-year window, he said, but only one in three adult prisoners re-offend during the same time frame.

“And instead of being \$18,000 for a bed [to confine adult prisoners],” he said, “it’s about \$90,000 a bed for a year in our juvenile system.”

Under the new law, juveniles charged with status offenses – crimes that are only illegal because of the offender’s age – will no longer be held in the state’s detention centers. Additionally, the new law places a greater emphasis on providing offenders with community-based alternatives to detention.

Deal said \$5 million has been budgeted for a voluntary grant program that seeks to develop more community-based detention alternative programs within the state, and he would like to expand funding for the program over the ensuing years.

“If we can save the money on one end,” he said, “it’ll allow us to use the money on the front end.”

As a former juvenile court judge, Deal said he was frustrated by only having two options for young during sentencing. “I could either send them to be incarcerated in a facility [or] I could send them back home into the environment that got them in trouble in the first place,” he said.

Deal said the new law grants judges more flexibility to keep young offenders out of facilities, and increases the likelihood of young offenders receiving substance abuse counseling or being enrolled in family therapy programs.

By “consolidating” high-risk juvenile offenders in facilities, he said that low-level offenders were now more likely to avoid being negatively influenced by young people he considered “truly dangerous.”

At the event, Deal also signed into law HB 182 (<http://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/en-US/display/20132014/HB/182>), a “practical bill” that he said expands the range of individuals that can be appointed to the position of juvenile court judge pro tempore – an act designed to reduce the amount of backlog and case overloads in the state’s juvenile court system.

“We believe that the reforms we make here will save the state about \$85 million over the next five years,” he said. “And we pretty well know from the statistics that it will keep us from having to build two new juvenile detention facilities.”

“The council’s analysis found that Georgia’s taxpayers have not received a sufficient safety return on their juvenile justice investment, with huge out-of-home facilities cost per youth corresponding with extraordinarily high recidivism rates,” said Judge Michael Boggs, co-chair of Georgia’s Criminal Justice Reform Council.

“Many of the juveniles in these costly out-of-home facilities [were] adjudicated for low-level offenses, including misdemeanors and status offenses, and that nearly 40 percent of these youths were assessed as low-risk to offend,” he continued. “This data drove our discussions, and ultimately our recommendations, which were aimed at holding offenders accountable, increasing public safety and reducing juvenile justice costs.”

“This reform bill is a win-win-win for Georgia,” said state Department of Juvenile Justice Commissioner Avery D. Niles, who also attended the event. “It’s a win for our youth who are neglected or abused, it’s a win for the Georgia youth that are in trouble, it’s a win for the taxpayers of Georgia.”