



Posted on Sun, Dec. 23, 2012

'Rip' Gooch: JJA move not good for crime, juveniles

By U.L. "Rip" Gooch

During the mid-1990s, the Legislature passed the Juvenile Justice Reform Act. This was a bipartisan effort that set the stage for juvenile justice in Kansas to be completely modernized in an effort to improve public safety and, at the same time, best serve the state's troubled youths.

A national search was conducted for a seasoned professional to lead this initiative. An individual was identified and appointed by Gov. Bill Graves in 1997, and over the next several years many state and local partnerships were formed to enhance juvenile justice. The juvenile system in Kansas became a national model.

The five secure facilities eventually were reduced to the two facilities that operate today in Topeka and Larned. Qualified staff members were recruited and professionally trained at the new juvenile training academy established during this era. And major incidents within the system were at a very manageable level.

As a state senator, I was proud to support the reform in this system. I am now greatly troubled by the direction being considered for juvenile justice ("Brownback announces plan to merge juvenile, adult corrections," Dec. 11 Eagle).

Moving juvenile justice under the Kansas Department of Corrections does absolutely nothing to address the special needs of troubled youths throughout Kansas or the current deficiencies within the department. We have a system that has proved it can work.

Where we have fallen short is by hiring under- and unqualified individuals to lead the department and by seriously cutting the department's funding.

Moving the Juvenile Justice Authority back under the Department of Corrections will only revive a system that is structured to train juveniles in Kansas for a future place in our adult criminal facilities. We must continue to fight the pipeline that leads our juveniles to prisons and, given the right leadership and adequate funding, we've proved our current approach can work.

At 89 years old, I am trying to enjoy life as a private citizen. But I am unwilling to be silent and let years of hard work and system improvements go down the drain.

I care about not only crime victims but also the many misguided youngsters who need redirecting and social development. I am appealing to the many stakeholders in Kansas to get involved and advocate for a rethinking of Gov. Sam Brownback's plan.

We must take a realistic look at what is working well within juvenile systems across the country. Kansas does not need more "young inmates in training." We need more "youths with hope."

If Brownback's proposed system is the best we can do to address juvenile crime in Kansas, we should be ashamed.

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