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## **State scraps plans to build youth jail in Baltimore**

### **Plans call for new juvenile treatment facility and retrofit of men's prerelease center**

By [Yvonne Wenger](#), The Baltimore Sun

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After years of community opposition, state officials have abandoned plans to build a new Baltimore jail for juveniles charged as adults, citing declines in youth crimes as they unveiled a plan Wednesday to send more teens to treatment programs and renovate a smaller facility for defendants in violent offenses.

The \$73 million plan, which needs approval from the General Assembly, lays the groundwork for a shift in the state's approach to teen crime in Baltimore. The state has faced persistent criticism over existing conditions for young defendants, but a proposal to build a new facility for juveniles raised concern that officials were not doing enough to deter children from lives of violence.

Some opponents of the youth jail said the increased focus on rehabilitation would help make the city safer.

"For me, this is a tremendous victory," said Angela Conyers Johnese, juvenile justice director for Advocates for Children and Youth. "Looking back, we felt we could never get to this point, that so many dollars had been budgeted for the jail, that there was nothing the community could do, that it was a done deal."

Gary Maynard, secretary of the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, and Sam Abed, secretary of the Department of Juvenile Services, released the details of their plan on the same day Gov. Martin O'Malley introduced a budget for the next fiscal year that removed funding for the new youth jail.

Roughly 50 juveniles charged as adults — facing charges for crimes such as assault, carjacking and murder — are incarcerated daily along with the city's adult offenders while they await trial. By law, the populations must be kept separate, but the state is under pressure from the federal government to improve conditions for the juveniles.

The state had expected to spend \$70 million on the proposed 120-bed youth jail, a total that had previously been reduced from more than \$100 million on a 180-bed facility.

The new plan also calls for a policy shift that would allow a portion of the youths charged as adults to stay in the city's juvenile facility while they petition to have their cases sent to the juvenile system. Juveniles charged with murder, rape and other violent offenses would not qualify for a transfer.

Abed said the plan hinges on the Department of Juvenile Services' finding a suitable site in the city to build a treatment facility where youth offenders could receive education, mental health therapy and substance abuse counseling, among other services. The agency wants to spend \$3 million to purchase a property.

He suggested the site of a vacant city school could be a potential location. A facilities plan recently laid out

by the public school system calls for closing 26 school buildings over 10 years and upgrading others.

The treatment facility would cost an estimated \$40 million, he said. Currently, 56 young offenders are housed at the Juvenile Justice Center, which has room for 120, Abed said.

The state's new plan centers on the renovation of a prerelease center for men near East Eager Street and Greenmount Avenue, which will hold minors now housed at the Baltimore City Detention Center. That project would cost an estimated \$30 million, Maynard said.

Once renovated, the facility will have air conditioning, classrooms, indoor and outdoor recreation space and 60 individual bedrooms with toilets and sinks. Those amenities are not standard for adult jails and prisons, Maynard said.

The 150 men incarcerated at the prerelease center will eventually be transferred to facilities closer to their homes throughout the state, Maynard said.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said the plan builds on recent success in lowering crime rates. Since 2007, violent crime is down in Maryland by 30 percent and juvenile homicides in Baltimore have dropped by half, according figures provided by the state Wednesday.

"Baltimore has significantly reduced juvenile violence through a robust partnership between state and local agencies," the mayor said in a statement, calling the plan "an appropriate alternative to the youth detention facility" that would expand youth treatment options.

City Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young, long an outspoken critic of the proposed jail and a proponent of more youth programs, had not had time to review the details on Wednesday but said that "anything short of the money being redirected to the youth is unacceptable."

"We want the money to go to opportunities for our kids," he said.

State Sen. Joan Carter Conway, a Baltimore Democrat, said the change has quelled much of the controversy surrounding the youth jail proposal. That included concerns about the jail's proposed location in East Baltimore next to the Baltimore Detention Center and other correctional facilities, she said.

"The community is inundated with institutions in that area," Conway said. "You have the prison system, the city jail, all these things that people don't want," in their neighborhoods.

Conway said she and others had identified about six other locations that could work as alternatives, including some abandoned schools. She also said the proposed budget for the project "didn't make sense" when there were sensible alternatives.

"I just think it's better that the governor has changed his mind at the urging of many legislators," Conway said.

Del. Curt Anderson, a Baltimore Democrat, said he does not expect the plan to meet stiff opposition in the General Assembly other than a typical evaluation of big-dollar spending.

"The plan represents a huge change from simply building a warehouse for young offenders charged as adults," Anderson said. "If there are legislators that feel this isn't an appropriate solution, so far I haven't run into them."

A letter signed by the chairs of the Legislative Black Caucus and the Baltimore City Delegation, as well as

other delegates and state senators, signaled that the groups will continue to push for an overhaul of the way children are charged as adults. The letter was sent to the governor's office Wednesday.

"While we concede the plan is a step in the right direction, it is merely a step," the letter said, describing additional actions the delegations want, such as the creation of an oversight committee on youth justice issues.

Hathaway Ferebee, director of the Safe and Sound Campaign, said the government should invest more in city recreational centers, apprenticeships and alternative sentencing, such as counseling for nonviolent offenders.

"Gov. O'Malley and state legislators have the opportunity to take that same money they were so willing to spend to build a jail to hold African-American kids — to house kids who are now 5, 6 or 7 years — and put in opportunities so all our kids have a fair chance at healthy development."

Ferebee said because nearly all the juveniles in Baltimore charged as adults are black, continuing to incarcerate those charged with nonviolent offenses "perpetuates this racism and it predicts the failure of young African-American kids living in Baltimore City."

To Kara Aanenson, lead organizer of the Just Kids Partnership, the unveiling of the new plan indicates that the state is willing to move in a direction that has better outcomes for young people and for public safety.

"We really think the governor and the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Juvenile Services all came together for something that is in the best interest of the kids. Is there more work to be done? Of course. But we definitely applaud the governor for taking this big step and not building the new jail."

*Baltimore Sun* reporters [Carrie Wells](#) and [Justin Fenton](#) contributed to this article.

[ywenger@baltsun.com](mailto:ywenger@baltsun.com)

[twitter.com/yvonneewenger](https://twitter.com/yvonneewenger)

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