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Money saved, safer streets

Editorial

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Illinois taxpayers shelled out \$70,827 on average to house each kid in a state-run juvenile correction facility in 2004-2005.

We didn't get much for our money -- about half of the kids who were released got into trouble again. We didn't do much to counsel them or figure out if they had underlying problems that pushed them into bad behavior. In fact, we encouraged local communities to ship them away. The state picked up the tab for housing juvenile offenders in its correctional facilities, but didn't pay for community-based rehabilitation programs.

That neglect started to change four years ago, when the state created Redeploy Illinois in four communities. The program sought to reduce admissions to juvenile prisons by encouraging the assessment and treatment of kids in their own communities for such problems as mental illness, substance abuse, learning disabilities and dangerous living situations.

The evidence is in, and Redeploy Illinois has worked beautifully.

The cost of treating youthful offenders in the program ranged from \$2,500 to \$9,500, far less than the cost of juvenile prison. In the first three years, the four participating counties saw a 51 percent decrease in commitments to state corrections facilities, saving the state an estimated \$19 million.

The best news was on public safety: fewer kids left the programs and got in trouble again. In St. Clair County, only 16 percent of kids committed a new crime within a year of finishing the program. Gov. Pat Quinn recently signed a bill to extend the pilot programs and expand Redeploy Illinois to other smaller counties. The Cook County Board will be asked to join in. This would be a good idea for Cook County, which is strapped for cash and has been plagued by problems at its juvenile detention center.

Redeploy Illinois saves money and steers kids in the right direction. The law signed by Quinn recognizes that, and clears the way for Cook County to get in the mix. Let's see that happen soon.

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