



booksnotbars.org

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Dear Commissioners:

Books Not Bars, a campaign of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, commends the Little Hoover Commission for its work to improve juvenile justice practices in California. At the November 15, 2007 Commission hearing, a clear consensus emerged among youth advocates, probation officials, and corrections administrators that downsizing California's youth prisons and treating youth in their home communities is a step in the right direction.

The realignment plan enacted by SB 81 and AB 191 represents a historic shift for juvenile justice in California. However, we should not assume that SB 81 will take its course without the state's continued, affirmative support. Already, these reforms are under attack. For example, Senator George Runner's ballot initiative, misleadingly named the "Safe Neighborhoods Act," would reverse important provisions of SB 81, increase penalties for scores of offenses, and divert funding from community services at a cost of nearly \$1 billion per year. Books Not Bars respectfully requests that the Commission oppose this initiative and bolster SB 81 before such attacks can take hold.

As described in the Commission hearing, a number of additional barriers threaten the successful implementation of realignment. First, county probation departments are not adequately prepared to take over delivering services to youth transferred to their care. Second, the Corrections Standards Authority does not have sufficient resources to ensure that counties develop the range of services needed to effectively supervise additional youth in their home communities. Finally, in the absence of accountability mechanisms, the state risks repeating at the local level the mistakes that created California's youth prison crisis years ago.

To make realignment effective, experts agree that California must adequately fund an appropriate state agency—be it the Corrections Standards Authority, the Department of Health and Human Services or a state juvenile justice agency—to supervise counties' uses of SB 81 funds and assist counties in developing a continuum of care for minors and young adults involved in the juvenile justice system. Such an agency would possess the fiduciary power to provide incentives for counties to implement the

most effective juvenile justice practices,<sup>1</sup> or to withhold funds from counties that fail to meet minimal standards for the safe, humane provision of rehabilitative services. In particular, the oversight agency could require that counties collaborate with community-based organizations to provide the range of needed services, and hold the counties that do not meet this requirement accountable. An ideal agency to lead this charge would fall under the Department of Health and Human Services, which would free the juvenile justice system from unsuitable adult criminal justice practices altogether.

While historic, SB 81 stops short of fully resolving the current crisis in California's youth prisons. The Division of Juvenile Justice remains under an adult prison system that has consistently failed to protect or serve the people under its supervision. Rather than spending millions of dollars to supervise a handful of youth in state prisons, California should dedicate its juvenile justice resources to ensuring that counties create continuums of care that will ultimately enable counties to supervise and treat all youth in or near their home communities.

Experts, advocates, families, and the state all agree that youth treated closer to their families and home communities are more likely to succeed. With sufficient funding and state oversight, counties can develop their mental health, substance abuse, education, employment, and housing capacities in order to provide integrated services locally to youth with the highest levels of risk and need. Perhaps more importantly, family members, whose participation in a young person's life is often the determining factor in his or her success, can contribute even more to the rehabilitation of their loved ones when all youth are returned home.

Respectfully,

Sumayyah Waheed  
Policy Director

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<sup>1</sup> Such practices are gender specific; provide for maximized time spent out of room; and provide education, vocational training, and substance abuse and mental health treatment, including the following evidence-based programs: Multisystemic Therapy, Functional Family Therapy, and Family Integrated Transitions. These programs have been assessed to provide benefits of reduced recidivism in dollar amounts ranging from \$18,213 to \$33,728 per participant. See E. Drake. (2007). *Evidence-Based Juvenile Offender Programs: Program Description, Quality Assurance, and Cost*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 07-06-1201.

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