

By Kurt Erickson for Pantagraph.com

SPRINGFIELD -- A new report says Illinois is locking up too many juveniles in youth prisons that are understaffed and lack effective programs.

The Chicago-based John Howard Association, which monitors the state's prison system, says more than two-thirds of the inmates housed within the Department of Juvenile Justice are non-violent offenders who may be unsuited for the prison-like atmosphere of eight youth facilities in Harrisburg, Murphysboro and elsewhere.

The state "spends an enormous amount of resources on youth that would be better served in community based programs rather than in correctional facilities," the organization notes.

It's not the first time the state's Department of Juvenile Justice has been targeted as a cumbersome, under-funded agency that needs to be overhauled.

But, the report could add fuel to a push by Gov. Pat Quinn to close one of the youth prisons. In September, in reaction to the budget approved by the General Assembly, the governor targeted the juvenile lock-up in Murphysboro for closure. He has since backed away from that plan as he and legislative leaders work out a new budget agreement.

Quinn now is eyeing closing up to four developmental centers and two mental health facilities over the next 2 ½ years.

If a budget deal isn't hammered out in the coming days, however, Quinn spokeswoman Brie Callahan said pink slips for 101 workers at Murphysboro will be sent out Dec. 1 in order to move forward with the closure on Dec. 31. A lawsuit filed by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 31 seeks to block the closure.

Murphysboro houses about 59 youth inmates in a facility built to handle more than 150. Opponents of the closure say it is a relatively new facility that could handle additional inmates if the state would instead shutter one of the state's older youth facilities.

In its report, the association notes that many of the facilities lack proper staffing levels and up-to-date educational supplies. Internet access is only now being installed at three of the eight prisons.

The agency "must either increase staff or reduce its youth population. Given the state's extreme budget crisis, the obvious solution to staff shortages is to take active steps to reduce the population of DJJ, allowing for more acceptable staff to youth ratios."

Chris Bernard, who authored the report, said the Murphysboro facility could be transformed into an adult prison to ease overcrowding within that system.

Illinois would not be alone if it closed some of its youth facilities.

Elizabeth Clarke, president of the Juvenile Justice Initiative, told a legislative panel last month that 18 states have closed over 50 juvenile prisons since 2007.

"As other states have concluded, good public policy and smart budgeting argue for closure of one or more of the eight juvenile prisons in Illinois with a shift of savings to community programming," Clarke told members of the Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability.