

By Amanda Verrette for [The Legislative Gazette](#)

Gov. Andrew Cuomo continues to build on reforms to the state's juvenile justice system by proposing the "Close to Home" initiative which would allow New York City's youth to be treated in facilities near their homes.

According to Cuomo's budget briefing, youth will be placed in settings that are appropriate for their educational, mental health, substance abuse and other service needs, without compromising public safety.

"Outcomes in the current state system are quite bad," said Jennifer March-Joly, executive director of Citizens' Committee for Children, adding that it costs current state facilities \$260,000 per year to incarcerate a child.

The Close to Home proposal would transition custody of youth placed in non-secure and limited-secure facilities from the state to facilities in New York City. Proponents of the plan say this would ensure that children are placed in facilities that provide better access to their families and easy contact with their attorneys.

"Family and community engagement is increasingly being recognized as critical to positive youth justice outcomes, and the people who are most impacted by the system and their allies in the advocacy community need to be involved in a substantial way in the design, review and on-going operation of the city's new plan," said Gabrielle Prisco, director of the Correctional Association of New York.

The proposal is also supported by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

"[The proposal would] serve children in a cost efficient manner and also produce better outcomes to ensure productive members of society," said March-Joly.

Reform proposals would also require a pre-dispositional risk assessment tool to make recommendations from the family court by local departments of probation more efficient.

"The development of this risk assessment tool would ensure local departments of probation can provide the family court with more rigorous data on the youth that come before the court," said March-Joly. "Having this information will then inform the decisions made by Family Court judges and increase their ability to divert youth from placement and engage youth in alternatives to placement when appropriate."

Last year, Cuomo eliminated empty prison beds, closed placement facilities and created funding for alternatives to detention and placement programs.

This year, the Executive Budget proposes to close additional facilities in a way that would allow the possibility of regional placement outside of New York City. The Office of Children and Family Services juvenile justice system capacity will be reduced by 324 beds and after care slots.

"The governor's initiative provides a unique opportunity for the creation of a new youth justice system in New York City, one that potentially could bring about better life outcomes for children and strengthen communities," said Soffiyah Elijah, executive director of the Correctional Association of New York..