

Gov. Jeff Landry, lawmakers to spend millions on juvenile detention center expansions

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October 21, 2024



Louisiana intends to spend millions of dollars on expanding juvenile detention

centers. Photo: Julie O'Donoghue/Louisiana Illuminator

Oct. 16 — Louisiana officials expect to put tens of millions of dollars over the next two months into expanding juvenile detention centers that house children and teenagers accused of crimes.

At the beginning of the summer, Gov. Jeff Landry and Louisiana lawmakers diverted \$100 million from a state savings account in order to make upgrades to criminal justice facilities. A large chunk of the money will be used to increase the state's capacity to incarcerate youth offenders, though the exact amount hasn't been set yet.

"We are trying to prioritize funding for regional juvenile facilities," Christopher Walters, Landry's deputy executive counsel, said at an August hearing about how the money will be spent. "We are lacking in bedspace for juvenile offenders."

The Landry administration gave the state juvenile justice office, adult prison system, sheriffs and parish officials the month of September [to apply for criminal justice grants](#) funded by money.

The Legislature's Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget will select the winning projects by the end of the year based on recommendations from a newly formed group called the Criminal Justice Priority Funding Commission, which is primarily made up of state lawmakers.

Projects eligible for the funding go beyond juvenile justice facilities. They also include criminal justice data integration efforts, crime labs and local adult jail upgrades.

Walters and lawmakers made it clear, however, that they intend to focus a large portion of the \$100 million on expanding the capacity of the Office of Juvenile Justice and local law enforcement to house more children and teenagers accused and

convicted of crimes.

The Louisiana Center for Children's Rights, which provides attorneys to incarcerated youth, disagrees with the decision to add detention center beds.

"We believe any money our legislature spends should be invested on the things that are proven to create community safety, disrupt the cycle of harm that incarceration perpetuates, and help youth feel supported and thrive in their homes, schools and communities, not additional detention centers," Kristen Rome, the organization's executive director, said in a written statement.

District attorneys and parishes in rural areas have struggled to find places to hold underage suspects they arrest because they don't operate their own local juvenile detention center. At times, they have resorted to sending them to facilities in Mississippi and Alabama, which is expensive for the local parishes.

The surge in juvenile detention spending also falls in line with Landry's overall "tough on crime" agenda. During his first few months in office, the Republican governor increased criminal penalties across the board, including ratcheting up punishments for younger people.

In February, Landry and lawmakers signed [a new law](#) that requires 17-year-olds who are arrested to be treated as adults in the criminal justice system. Previously, district attorneys had been given the discretion to charge a 17-year-old as either an adult or a minor.

This law change has also put pressure on local jail and juvenile center capacity. While state law now classifies 17-year-olds to be adults, federal law does not. Some sheriffs have been unwilling to house 17-year-olds in adult jails, despite the state law change, because they say they don't have enough space to comply with federal regulations that apply to incarcerated minors.

At least three regions of the state seem poised to get some funding to open new juvenile detention centers.

Kenny Loftin, deputy secretary of the Office of Juvenile Justice, said at an August hearing that he expects the Central Louisiana Juvenile Detention Center Authority to receive money. First established in 1997, the group has been trying to build a local juvenile justice facility for decades.

The planned detention center would serve Avoyelles, Catahoula, Concordia, Grant, LaSalle, Vernon and Winn parishes.

Legislators also set up two other juvenile justice districts in 2023 with an eye toward increasing the number of spaces available for incarcerated children and teens.

The Acadiana Juvenile Justice District would be expected to run a detention center for Acadia, Allen, Evangeline, Iberia, Jefferson Davis, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary and Vermilion parishes.

The River Parishes Juvenile Justice District would build and run a detention center for Ascension, Assumption, St. Charles, St. James and St. John the Baptist. Lafourche Parish Sheriff Craig Webre said in an interview last month that his parish might also join this group.

In both cases, the juvenile justice districts would be controlled by local sheriffs, district attorneys and judges. In Acadiana, each parish government would also have seats on the detention center governing body.

The River Parishes Juvenile Justice District is partially funded through criminal justice fines. In the Acadiana district, parishes will be able to levy a local tax to help cover the costs of the new detention center.

The state will also be picking up some of the ongoing operating costs of these

detention centers.

In order to receive one of the state grants, the districts will have to agree to use at least 30% of their beds to house incarcerated youth who have been found guilty of crime already and are in the state system.

This means the new detention centers will be housing minors who are arrested – but not yet convicted – of crimes alongside children and teenagers who have been found guilty of an offense. While Louisiana has long done this in the adult system, it refrained from mixing those two populations among minors until now.

Mary Livers, who was the head of the Office of Juvenile Justice for Gov. Bobby Jindal, agrees Louisiana needs more juvenile justice beds, but worries about housing pre- and post-adjudicated youth alongside each other as planned.

She said the young people who have been found guilty of a crime need intensive treatment that isn't typically offered in regional detention centers.

“The risk would be that kids would not get the treatment they were supposed to get in an OJJ facility,” Livers said in an interview.

State Sen. Heather Cloud, R-Turkey Creek, said at the August hearing the state had decided to house the two populations together so that the new juvenile justice system would have a “sustainable” source of funding and not run into financial problems.

Livers also said she had hoped to see the state conduct a study of state facility needs before officials started allocating money to build new juvenile justice facilities.

“I’m disappointed there doesn’t appear to have been more planning done,” she said.

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