

Interfaith Children's Movement is a member of the JUSTGeorgia Coalition.

JUSTGeorgia:

Updating the Juvenile Code to Better Serve Children and our Communities

The 2013 Georgia General Assembly will consider a major overhaul to the state's outdated juvenile justice system that could improve the outcomes for court-involved children while saving taxpayer dollars and creating long-term, positive social and economic impact.

Last year, a bipartisan committee – the Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform for Georgians – was commissioned by the General Assembly to analyze the state's sentencing and corrections data for adults. Earlier this year, Gov. Nathan Deal extended the work of this council to also focus on reforms for juvenile justice.

The council's own study of Georgia's juvenile justice system along with the Child Protection and Public Safety Act (also referred to as the juvenile code rewrite) previously considered by state legislators, is expected to modernize Georgia's juvenile justice system.

The juvenile code rewrite is expected to include key measures such as provisions to ensure that older children in foster care are given the opportunity and assistance they need to plan for their futures; a new approach for intervening with children who are currently considered unruly that addresses offenses such as truancy and running away with family involvement and community-based resources; and a provision allowing judges to consolidate delinquency and dependency hearings to hear all proceedings with the same child and tailor each disposition, resulting in conservation of court resources.

The Child Protection and Public Safety Act would offer more protection to our children and allow the courts to respond to children with more appropriate and timely intervention to prevent them from getting further entrenched in the juvenile justice system.

Benefits of this reform ultimately include saving taxpayer dollars, too. For example, effective services in the community are far cheaper than holding a child in a detention center. The annual expense for one child at a youth development campus is \$96,000. By comparison, the cost of a non-secure residential placement is \$29,000 and community supervision of a child costs only \$3,000 over the same period. Additionally, encouraging mediation instead of court appearances as the juvenile code rewrite allows, shortens time to resolution of cases and lowers court costs.

Georgia's current juvenile law is a patchwork of provisions stitched together over four decades. The Child Protection and Public Safety Act creates consistency and improves procedural fairness. Making the case for reforming the juvenile justice system in her 2012 State of the Judiciary Address to the General Assembly, Chief Justice Carol Hunstein said, "The same reforms we are recommending to you for adults must begin with children."

To learn more about the Child Protection and Public Safety Act, contact JUSTGeorgia, a statewide juvenile justice coalition of community organizations and individuals whose purpose is to advocate for change to Georgia's juvenile code and the underlying social services systems to better serve Georgia's children and promote safer communities. To learn more, go to www.justga.org or follow the organization on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JUSTGeorgiaCoalition.