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**Capitol View**

**Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**Kudos on Quick Action on YRTC Issues**

Congratulations to the state Department of Health and Human Services for coming up with a quick interim solution to problems plaguing the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center in Geneva.

Kudos for proposing something, which, on its face, appears to be more than a Band-Aid. Here’s hoping that all involved: the youth; their parents; the juvenile justice system and its watchdogs; and any naysayers will be pleasantly surprised as this plays out.

In August, a group of state senators responded to complaints and toured the Geneva facility. The girls there were immediately moved to the Kearney facility, which was established in 1881. It was the first time in years that boys and girls were together at the state-run, campus style correctional and rehabilitation facility.

Two legislative interim study hearings were held in Geneva and Kearney earlier this month and Health and Human Services CEO Dannette Smith recently announced her new plan to house girls and boys at Kearney, girls and boys with more trauma and behavioral health issues at the Lancaster County Juvenile Corrections Center in Lincoln and a small number of girls at Geneva who are transitioning from treatment to community and school.

At Kearney, state officials will phase in a program for boys and girls, including an assessment of needs when they arrive to determine placement. Current services include school, recreation, behavioral health treatment and telemedicine services. Those determined to have high needs for behavioral or mental health treatment or have assaultive or self-harming behavior, and are

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consistently aggressive with their peers or adults could be transferred to Lincoln.

Smith said the Lincoln program would be better for clients with trauma and behavioral health issues. She said transfers would be made based on a pattern of behavior that couldn’t be redirected, not just a single instance.

In Geneva, where residents told lawmakers and state officials that they really support YRTC in spite of recent troubles that resulted in the closing of all the buildings on campus, the new program would accept three to six girls who are 60 days from leaving the program by getting them ready to reengage in school and their communities. Furlough and overnight visits away from the center would allow staff to see how the girls are readjusting.

One building at Geneva has been remodeled following the August incidents, which saw massive destruction of the already aging physical plant. Water and mold and security problems had to be addressed.

Smith said programming will include family treatment and personal life skills. The final 60 days of a youth’s treatment will be 30 days of preparation and 30 days of skills application. She wants to start small because of staffing problems. A smaller program can also be easily realigned if necessary.

Plans also call for a similar re-entry program for the boys at Kearney. She calls the overall plan a step in the right direction. I agree.

Juliet Summers, Voices for Children policy coordinator, said the child advocacy group is concernedBottom of Form

 the plan creates an additional youth prison (in Lincoln) at a time when states across the country are moving away from the failed model of youth incarceration. She added that it fails to use current best practices in assessment and treatment for behavioral health. Her concerns are duly noted and should serve as a benchmark for monitoring the behavioral health component when it moves to Lincoln.

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Summers also called for a broader look at the system and investment in community-based services that keep kids connected to their families and communities while they work to address issues. Smith acknowledged there is a longer community conversation that must be held on how to serve these children.

Agreed. But this interim and immediate step is both necessary and refreshing in light of the fact that the community corrections approach for adults has been more talk than action. Perhaps the lessons learned from this new youth model will aid in that discussion as well.

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***J.L. Schmidt has been*** *covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 20 years.*