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Reform underway at Florida's juvenile justice agency

On January 3, 2012, in Governor's Op Eds, by staff

By Rick Scott, Governor of Florida

Like all Floridians, I was deeply saddened to learn of the tragic death of a child in the Palm Beach County Juvenile Detention Center. More than saddened though, I take Eric Perez's death personally. It's a sobering reminder of the urgent need for comprehensive juvenile justice reform in Florida. Investigations into his death continue, and we won't rest until every unresolved question about it is answered.

The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) manages more than 120,000 juvenile delinquency cases each year. On any given day, we have more than 5,000 children in secure custody – more than 1,000 of whom are in facilities like the one where Eric spent the last days of his young life. Those numbers are far too high.

Since I appointed Wansley Walters earlier this year to lead DJJ, her agency has launched a statewide reform effort that will enhance public safety, conserve scarce resources and improve youth outcomes. As the former head of Miami-Dade's Juvenile Services Department, Secretary Walters spearheaded cost-effective reforms that were recognized internationally. As a result, Miami not only has the lowest juvenile incarceration rate in the state, but also boasts one of Florida's lowest juvenile crime rates.

Each element of DJJ's reform initiative is critical to ensure that youth receive the right combination of services and sanctions, in the right place at the right time.

- Diversion. The expansion of civil citation and other innovative diversion practices will stem the flow of first-time misdemeanant youth into the system. Historically, Florida has spent millions of dollars on interventions for low-risk youth who would probably never re-offend.
• Detention Reform. Statewide detention reform, including the development of real alternatives to detention, will fuel continued reductions in unnecessary and inappropriate detention. Reduced detention over the past five years allowed DJJ to close hundreds of beds, yielding a cost-savings of more than \$25 million.
• Right-Sizing Residential Care. The past five years have also revealed significant inefficiencies at the deep-end of Florida's juvenile justice system, with far too many low-risk youth confined in expensive residential institutions. They consume scarce resources that could instead be invested in community-based sanctions that hold youth accountable, protect public safety, create jobs and promote healthy futures for children. Community-based sanctions are more effective at reducing juvenile crime and cost much less than correctional institutions.

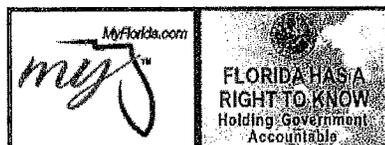
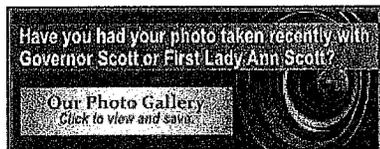
These three aspects of juvenile justice reform are urgently needed, now more than ever. We cannot afford the financial or the societal costs of unnecessary juvenile incarceration. By shifting our focus – and our investments – to the front end of the system, we will save not only money, but also lives.

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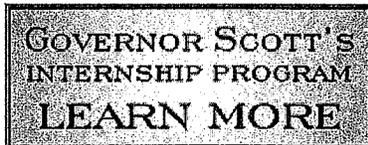
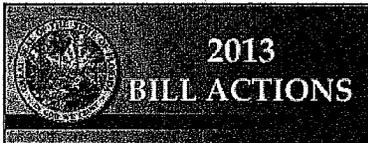
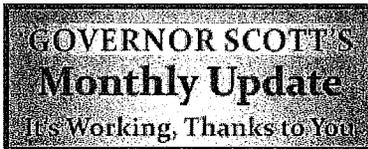
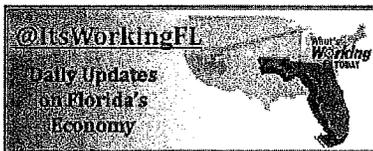
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