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New law aimed at juvenile detention

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State Rep. Linda Whittington hopes a new law she authored will save Mississippi's juvenile detention centers \$600,000 per year.

The state is currently losing that much annually because it is not in compliance with three of four requirements of a 2002 federal act intended to keep minors from having contact with adult prisoners.

Whittington's bill, which was signed into law last month, gives the Department of Public Safety greater power to inspect records at juvenile detention centers.

The Democrat from Schlater said part of the reason the state is losing the money — \$200,000 per violation — is that it doesn't have the data the federal law requires.

Now the state's monitoring unit will be able to collect information on youths in detention centers and thus determine what it needs to do to get in line with regulations.

"What we're trying to figure out is who exactly is out of compliance," Whittington said.

The law carries a punch for jailers who try to hide data. Anyone who prohibits an inspector from performing his or her duties will face a fine of up to \$1,000.

Leflore County Judge Kevin Adams, who presides over youth court and oversees the detention center, said the idea will help the state better show what juvenile detention centers are already doing.

"It's actually a very nice bill statewide, but really all it does is codify what we've been trying to do," he said.

He complimented Whittington and state Rep. John Hines, D-Greenville, a co-sponsor, for always being at the forefront of juvenile justice issues and said they help keep Mississippi ahead of the curve.

Whittington has served on the state advisory group for juvenile justice for three years and is a member of the House Juvenile Justice Committee.

Adams said Leflore County is already in compliance in the three areas in which the state is lacking.

The first, deinstitutionalization of status offenders, involves keeping youths caught committing offenses that apply only to children — skipping school, breaking curfew or drinking alcohol — from lengthy detentions. Instead, they are to receive residential home treatment, counseling, alternative education or job training.

Sentencing in Leflore County already takes that route, according to the judge.

Whittington thinks the state as a whole might already be fulfilling the status offender portion and hopes the new data will prove that, which would save \$200,000.

"We need all the money we can get for our juvenile justice centers," she said.

The other violations — separation of detained juveniles from incarcerated adults and removal of children from

jails — are not a problem in Leflore County because the juvenile detention center houses all youth offenders.

The one requirement that the state currently meets involves having a system for assessing why minority youth are more likely to be incarcerated. Whittington said the state hired a coordinator to handle that task.

Coincidentally, Adams said representatives from the Annie E. Casey Foundation are in Leflore County this week to tackle that very issue.

Adams said he is applying for a grant for a software system that would allow the center to better keep and report records.

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