

Report says juvenile justice system could be more effective

by Chris Thomas, Oregon News Service

More than a third of Oregon young people who have been incarcerated are convicted of felonies within three years of their release.

A new report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation sheds light on that figure, with evidence that youth correctional facilities don't stop recidivism and don't benefit public safety.

It also says incarceration wastes taxpayers' money with large corrections or training centers when smaller, treatment-oriented facilities cost less and get better results.

Mark McKechnie is executive director of Youth Rights and Justice, attorneys who serve as youth public defenders in Multnomah County. He agrees with the findings and says he hopes the report prompts Oregon to rethink the

way it handles young offenders, "I think it's somewhat convenient for states who are struggling with budget questions that in most cases, the most effective approaches to juvenile justice also happen to be less expensive than what most states are doing currently."

About 60 percent of young offenders have mental health issues, according to the Oregon Youth Authority. McKechnie says it's a problem schools and state agencies are not doing enough to address, "Our experience is that, in many cases, those needs were not being met before they entered the juvenile justice system. I think you could draw a pretty clear line connecting the lack of help for their mental-health needs to their behavior that got them into the justice system."

The report makes six recommendations to help states im-

prove their juvenile-justice systems. One is to do more for foster children, who face many of the same risks as young offenders. Bart Lubow, the Casey Foundation's Juvenile Justice Strategy Group director, says another recommendation is to ease up on "zero-tolerance" policies at schools and focus instead on getting youths the help they need before they break the law, "The largest sin-

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