

# Guest column: New law will endanger Florida girls

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## The Florida Times-Union Letters from Readers

Imagine a group of young girls who suffer from depression, severe neglect, sexual and physical abuse and are in the care of a government entity.

Now imagine that these girls' caretakers have no experience working with children, no familiarity with the medical and mental health needs of emotionally and physically battered girls, no support for training and no supervision by professionals with child-specific experience.

Then consider extremely limited resources for the care, health services and education of these particularly vulnerable and needy children.

This scenario sounds like it would lead straight to public calls for vastly improved child protection and investigations into government agencies' poor management and improper use of taxpayers' dollars.

Unfortunately, it accurately describes legislation passed by the Florida Legislature (SB 2112) and signed into law.

Ostensibly motivated by a desire to save money, the new law allows children to be housed in county jails outside the oversight, supervision or even inspections by anyone experienced with the care of children, like the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.

Specifically, the children affected are those who have been charged with a juvenile offense prior to the case being heard and acted upon in juvenile court.

Critical for all children, child-specific standards are especially important for young girls:

- Girls enter the juvenile justice system at earlier ages than boys.
- Girls are detained for significantly less serious crimes than boys.
- Girls remain in detention longer.
- Girls enter the system with higher rates of trauma and abuse - research suggests 70 percent of girls entering the system have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse.

Girls are in special need of gender-specific mental and physical health care, including gynecological care, and health education that addresses personal safety, self-care and the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Both common sense and research tell us that children housed in adult jails are at increased risk.

Girls are five times more likely to be sexually assaulted, twice as likely to be beaten by staff and 50 percent more likely to be attacked with a weapon in an adult facility than in a juvenile facility.

Youth housed in an adult facility are 34 percent more likely to return to jail - an outcome that does not save money.

The Children's Campaign and The Center for Girls and Young Women of the National Council on Crime & Delinquency and oppose the detention of children in county jails.

As citizens of Florida, we must work together to urge Duval County to continue to support the detention of children in centers operated by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice and encourage a similar practice in other counties.

*- Lawanda Ravoira of Jacksonville is director of the Center for Girls & Young Women National Council on Crime & Delinquency,*

*- Roy Miller of Tallahassee is president of the Children's Campaign.*

Read more at Jacksonville.com: <http://jacksonville.com/opinion/letters-readers/2011-09-21/story/guest-column-new-law-will-endanger-florida-girls#ixzz1Yi8wgCxx>