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EDITORIAL

The state is unfit parent

It costs \$70,827 each year to incarcerate a juvenile in the Illinois Department of Corrections, while Redeploy Illinois lets troubled kids stay in their community and get the services and skills they need to keep them out of jail for the rest of their life --and all for just \$4,000 to \$6,000 per child.

Which would you pick? It appears to be a no-brainer to us. And don't forget, please, the high cost of just one year of juvenile incarceration pales in comparison to the cost to taxpayers to jail the repeat adult offender and to society for the incarcerated youth who too often returns to that community as an adult no better, and to often much worse, than when he or she left it.

For too long, America has been locking kids up and throwing away the key, and the results have been every bit as horrible as one might imagine. Government pays too much of your tax dollars to institutionalize kids and society pays the price of an ever-growing number of career criminals who spend a lifetime being a burden on society. Warehousing kids isn't the answer, particularly non-violent ones who can still be reached.

About five years ago, Illinois reformers decided to do something about it. They got lawmakers to sign onto a pilot program in four Illinois communities aimed at keeping kids out of jail and in their own community. On Tuesday, Gov. Pat Quinn signed legislation which expands the program statewide to 70 other communities in need. We salute the governor and lawmakers for rejecting failed policies of the past in favor of doing everything possible to save these kids.

Under Redeploy Illinois, the state pays the county to provide services these kids need to keep them out of jail. It's worked well so far -- officials estimate some 400 youths have been diverted from costly incarceration in state facilities. It's uncertain how

many have been permanently rescued from a life of crime, violence and poverty. The program isn't old enough to do long range recidivism tracking, but common sense says a kid who is helped at home with the services he desperately needs is far less likely to become a hardened criminal than the one who is sent away with little help in the rehabilitation process.

That's the beauty of Redeploy Illinois: Kids pay for their crimes, but they are given the tools they need to keep from repeating them. Before the expansion legislation, backers say, counties without Redeploy Illinois had no financial incentives for treating rather than warehousing troubled kids.

That "perverse system" encourages judges to put youths away where the state will pick up the tab. With Redeploy Illinois, counties get money to treat youths with homegrown programs at far less expense and with greater success. In exchange, the participating counties agree to reduce the number of youths sent to state facilities by 25 percent or face a fine.

"By giving counties a financial incentive to keep non-violent youth out of expensive state facilities, Redeploy Illinois has shown the potential to save the state millions of dollars and at the same time help turn around the lives of troubled teens," said Paula Wolff, senior executive of Chicago Metropolis 2020. "Redeploy Illinois demonstrates that dollars and lives are saved when juveniles are held accountable for their actions and rehabilitated in their home communities."

And there is plenty of evidence of what happens to young people who are tossed into the system.

Recently, for example, the Chicago Tribune detailed the fate of a 10- and 11-year-old who would spend the better part of their lives behind bars. They were tried as adults in 1994 for dropping a 5-year-old out of the window.

Yet, despite the decade they would spend in state custody in juvenile detention, one is functionally illiterate. Both, as free adults, have encountered frequent problems on the streets and prison, for them, is a revolving door.

As Shaena Fazal, director of Long-Term Prison

Policy, wrote in the Chicago Tribune April 4, "An attorney for one of the youths was quoted as saying his client 'is the only kid I know who was raised by the Department of Corrections." Clearly, IDOC is an unfit parent." That, we fear, is putting it mildly.

It's no secret that prisons produce hardened criminals. That's not a product taxpayers should be particularly pleased about exporting to unsuspecting communities. We hope Redeploy Illinois will help to prevent that.