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Gilliam changes welcome, but delay was unforgivable

Changes at Denver's main youth lock-up are welcome, but they shouldn't have taken so long. State and local authorities have known for years that Gilliam Youth Services Center was overcrowded and understaffed, and that kids brought into detention might leave more hardened and anti-social than when they entered.

Many of these youths were guilty of nothing more than a minor traffic violation, yet they slept and ate side by side with suspected gang members. Some kids hadn't yet gone to court, but they were jammed into cells with inmates convicted of violent crimes.

The place was built to hold only 64 residents, but housed as many as 200; the only way to accommodate the higher number was to shove five kids into a bare room fit for only one person. Some of these cells reeked of blood, urine and feces.

These Dickensian conditions were worse than those in Colorado's adult prisons and jails, where check forgers are separated from murderers, and suspects awaiting trial are kept apart from convicts already judged by a court of law.

Rather than deterring youths from crime, Gilliam may have made troubled youngsters more prone to future problems. In fact, Gilliam has been plagued by escapes, attempted escapes, suicide threats and at least one sexual assault.

Small wonder that Colorado got slapped with a federal class-action lawsuit, brought by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of Gilliam's inmates.

The settlement, which was announced Wednesday, is practical and affordable. Cops will process paperwork on youthful offenders at the downtown Denver police station, reducing the number of children that Gilliam actually must house.

Young offenders convicted of traffic and other minor offenses will pay fines or be taken to residential child-care facilities, where they will be carefully watched but not kept behind bars.

The result: Gilliam's population will be capped at 78 residents, all serious offenders. The smaller population will let the staff better monitor the inmates and so reduce the chance of assaults, escapes or suicide attempts. The youths will find more humane conditions, and public safety ultimately will be better protected.

Colorado officials could have implemented all these changes on their own, without waiting for an expensive lawsuit to force the issue. In fact, just a few years ago the state settled a different lawsuit caused by crowded conditions in its old maximum-security adult prison. That Colorado didn't pay attention to how it treated its jailed children at the same time was unforgivable.

A key element of the puzzle remains unresolved. Colorado needs another youth detention center in Denver — the penny-pinching state legislature even has allocated money for it. Yet the city has moved so slowly that Denver hasn't even picked a site for the facility.

The reason for the delay boils down to politics. No one in City Hall wants to upset voters in any neighborhood by suggesting a particular area may be chosen as the new detention site. This vacuum likely will persist at least until after the June 6 runoff election, when timid politicians may be more likely to face up to voters' questions.

But Denver's troubled youths shouldn't be put on hold because of anyone's political ambitions. Denver Manager of Safety Butch Montoya, the point person on the site-selection process, should move forward with a decision in the next few weeks.