An Act Relative to Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Commission (S.27/H.3102)

Lead Sponsors – Senator Joseph Boncore and Representative Christopher Markey

“We think one of the most important parts of [our state's reforms] is the data collection and evidence-based practices—essentially making sure we’re spending money where results are predictable and the best results will be achieved.”

-Georgia Governor Nathan Deal

The legislature has passed a series of laws in recent years aimed at creating a juvenile justice system that is better at reducing crime; more fair, safe and rehabilitative for youth; and more cost-effective for taxpayers. However, whether these goals are achieved relies largely on execution. The juvenile justice system is a complex organism. It has all too often failed to produce data showing its compliance with the legislature’s intent. Increased transparency is clearly needed.

- What is the return on investment of funding the various juvenile justice programs?
- What programs work and what don’t work?
- What impact will different policy options have?
- How can evidence and outcome data help policymakers prioritize limited resources?

Effective public policy cannot be based on instinct or anecdote. It must be based on solid information that enables policymakers and practitioners to identify and quantify problems in the system, propose and implement solutions and then evaluate whether the solutions are effective.

This bill would create a Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Commission to evaluate policies related to the juvenile justice system, oversee the collection and dissemination of aggregate data regarding the system, and study the implementation of any major statutory changes to the juvenile justice system, including the expansion of juvenile jurisdiction. This Commission would ensure the juvenile justice “feeder systems” – child welfare, education and mental health systems– are represented. The Commission would:

- Examine the current data collection processes to remove inefficiencies and facilitate the coordination of information sharing between state agencies and the courts;
- Identify and evaluate racial and ethnic disparities within the juvenile justice system and recommend ways to improve the system’s fairness;
- Evaluate the impact of any legislation that alters the functioning of the juvenile court;
- Monitor quality and accessibility of diversionary programs available to children and youths;
- Study the justice-involvement of youth who are also involved in the child welfare or the mental health systems;
- Review appropriations necessary to accomplish any goals or suggested policy changes identified by the Commission.

Given lawmakers’ obvious commitment to juvenile justice reform, the Commission would be a useful tool. It could synthesize state data, national research and evidence from the experience of other states. Ongoing reforms would be guided by leading edge knowledge, producing smart policy that will benefit communities, youth and taxpayers.

1 The Council of State Governments Justice Center Sixth Presentation, December 21, 2016

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