

Officials differ on effect of budget cuts on gangs

By Liz Carey, Rick Spruill

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Officials with the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice worry that gang problems could increase if the state decides to cut the department's budget again. But not all Anderson-area officials agree.

In Anderson County, officials estimate that more than 400 young men and women are involved in gangs.

Bill Byars, director of the state Juvenile Justice Department, said if legislators cut the agency's budget any further, the number of young people in gangs could go up, increasing crime rates and hurting business.

"I'm not sure where the money would come from, but I'm not sure we could wait," said Byars, who made his case Wednesday before a South Carolina House of Representatives Ways and Means subcommittee. "If you don't suppress the gangs, it's going to hurt economic development."

His agency has been cut roughly 25 percent in 18 months, and is facing even deeper cuts as legislators consider ways to fill a \$563 million budget hole. Byars said he's running out of options.

Layoffs of several hundred employees at the department because of previous cuts have forced the closing of 19 programs.

Rep. Dan Cooper, the Anderson County Republican who is chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, said cuts will be necessary to address the shortfall in the budget. While the state will be able to fill \$350 million of that shortfall with federal stimulus money received by the state, that leaves a \$200 million gap.

"Nobody wants to get a cut, and nobody wants to actually give cuts," Cooper said. "But, we need \$200 million in order to avoid cuts, and we're not going to get it. You can tell by the unemployment numbers people aren't spending money."

When stimulus money goes away, Cooper said, the state could be looking at filling a \$1 billion hole.

"I keep telling the agency directors that they're going to look back at this year as the good times," he said.

Amy Bradshaw, Anderson County's director for the state Juvenile Justice Department, said a recent 5 percent budget cut had been absorbed, but additional cuts would have an effect.

"Judge Byars did a great job with the 5 percent budget cuts we just took, and fortunately there were no job cuts," Bradshaw said. "But any future cut could certainly impact our county office. It all depends on how deep it is."

Bradshaw said cuts dating back to the 2008-09 fiscal year added pressure to an office that processed more than 640 juveniles through the county's family court system in 2009.

"The Juveniles Experiencing Excellence Program was taken in November of 2008 when the largest cut came," she said. "The JEEP program was an after-school program offered through Westside High School that provided life-skills training and job-readiness (training) for low-end offenders. For kids from low-income families, losing a job puts pressure on them."

Plans for anti-gang teams in communities across the state — initially costing \$2 million for 46 teams — never got off the ground.

Anderson County Sheriff John Skipper said that because the sheriff's budget is based on local tax collections, gang-related enforcement activities are not affected by the state-level cuts.

"Our gang task force is still up and running at full speed," Skipper said. "Obviously the gangs are not going away, and in any given area of the state local program cuts could lead to an increase in gang membership."

When asked whether he agreed with Byars that gang activity hurts economic development, Skipper said, "I guess there is the potential for that, but you can't say it with 100 percent assurance. It depends on the type of economic development the county is looking for and gearing itself toward."

Skipper said he is pleased with the work being done by the Gang Task Force.

"They're doing a lot with a little right now," he said.

Interim Anderson County Administrator Rusty Burns said gangs are a community issue.

"It's not just the Department of Juvenile Justice, it's the schools, it's mom and dad, it's the churches, it's the social organizations, it's the city, municipal and county parks and recreation departments," he said. "All of these groups work together to help prevent kids from going off track. And all of us will have to come together to address this issue, not just lay the glory or the blame at the feet of one state department."

The real issue, Burns said, is not which agencies' budgets to cut, but how the state raises money in the first place.

"The current budget crisis is literally pitting all of these public entities against one another," he said. "This is probably one of the worst budget situations this state has faced since the Great Depression. Times are tough all around. Revenues are down all

across the state and all across the country. We've got to have legislators and elected officials who have the strength of character to not only make the tough decisions, but the right decisions for all of us."

Nearly one in 10 high school students in South Carolina is in a gang, according to a survey made public this month by the state Department of Education.

Sue Berkowitz of Appleseed Legal Justice Center, which advocates for the poor, called it a scary and depressing situation.

"This is more than just a social consequence," Berkowitz said. "For every child we lose to a gang, that's not a short-term social club. It often becomes a lifestyle that leads to greater and greater consequences and more and more cost."

Further cuts to the juvenile justice department would have far-reaching consequences, said Randolph Dillingham, director of the Anderson County Alternative School. The school provides educational opportunities to children who have been expelled from any of the county's five public school districts.

"If you cut the Department of Juvenile Justice, those of us in education who are working against this gang mentality, that's one less resource we will have," Dillingham said. "We are in a position where we have established a great relationship with the probation people and other officials in DJJ. If we have kids who are in the system, we have access to those DJJ staff members to come over and do counseling. ... If we don't have access, or they have fewer people in their office, then obviously it's going to affect us negatively."

A man who appeared at the legislative subcommittee meeting Wednesday as an expert witness on gangs likened them to incurable cancer.

"The money might go away, but the gangs aren't," said Robert Walker of Lake Murray.

His law enforcement career includes stints as a border patrol agent, a Drug Enforcement Agency investigator and coordinator of South Carolina Department of Corrections' gangs unit.

Programs to bring young people off the streets are at least giving them some hope, Walker said.

"I think you'd be surprised at the number of kids who really do take an interest in what's being offered," he said.

An American Civil Liberties Union report suggests that major problems at the juvenile justice department would compromise both the well-being of juveniles and the public's safety.

The report said an investigation into the department by the ACLU found staff abuse, dangerously low numbers of staff members and unacceptably high levels of juvenile violence.

"The juvenile detention system in South Carolina is in critical condition and in desperate need of positive intervention," said Victoria Middleton, executive director of the ACLU South Carolina Office. "We need to invest the funds necessary to ensure

constitutionally adequate, secure facilities, and we need to reduce the number of juveniles who are incarcerated in the first place.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.



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