

Stated Meeting: Council Approves Agency Merger

by Courtney Gross

Thursday, November 18, 2010 12:00 AM



Photo (cc)

In a move hailed by advocates, the City Council approved the official [merger](#) of the [Administration for Children's Services](#) and the [Department of Juvenile Justice](#) Wednesday in the hopes of keeping children out of jail and promoting alternative incarceration programs.

The merger will also allow for the closing of a controversial juvenile facility in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx -- known as [Bridges Juvenile Center or formerly Spofford](#). A department spokesperson said the center would close late this year or early next year.

The merger of the two departments was first announced in Mayor Michael Bloomberg's [state of the city speech](#) in January. It will not only save money, officials said, but it will hopefully save lives.

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"The city has made great strides in recent years in our efforts to reduce crime and recidivism while also improving outcomes for youth, their families and our communities," said Bloomberg in a prepared statement. "By merging the city's juvenile detention and child welfare programs, we will strengthen our ability to improve long-term outcomes for youth involved with the juvenile justice system -- many of whom have also been in the child welfare system."

The merger ([Intro 195](#)) was approved by a vote of 46 to 1, with Councilmember Oliver Koppell abstaining. Councilmember Charles Barron voted against the consolidation.

Two Becomes One

Supporters of the merger, who include many of the city's [large juvenile justice advocacy groups](#), say it's a logical next step toward keeping kids out of jail.

"The merger of Administration for Children's Services and the Department of Juvenile Justice emphasizes that the young people that are involved with the Department of Juvenile Justice are children so [they] should be treated as children and receive the services that they need," said Stephanie Gendell, associate executive director for policy and public affairs at the [Citizens' Committee for Children of New York](#).

According to the Administration for Children's Services, more than 60 percent of juveniles in detention have had previous contact with the child welfare agency. By consolidating the agencies, the city can streamline the permanent placement of foster children in detention and better work with families whose children are involved with both agencies, [Commissioner John Mattingly](#) said in testimony to the council last week. As part of the merger, officials said the city plans to put more children, if eligible, in alternative programs, allowing them to stay in the community and with family.

Perhaps the most significant part of the merger would be the closure of the 150-bed Bridges juvenile facility in the Bronx. By siphoning off more juveniles to community-based alternatives, the city can reduce the number of kids sent to one of its three facilities and ultimately close Bridges, officials said.

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Between fiscal year 2006 and fiscal year 2010, the average daily population in juvenile facilities in the city has dropped from 449 to 388, according to the [mayor's office](#) . At the same time, the cost per youth per day has increased from \$476 to \$651.

The merger is expected to save the city \$2.4 million, according to the council.

While the agencies have been operating under the same commissioner since January and they consolidated administrative functions over the summer, the legislation approved Wednesday officially allows the two departments to become one.

Even though the majority of the response to the consolidation has been supportive, there are still skeptics.

"The administration has said all the right things," said Councilmember Lewis Fidler of Brooklyn, who reluctantly voted for the proposal. "I am going to take them at their word. In the past, mergers and acquisitions have been code word for service cuts."

Some advocates have raised similar concerns and have urged the mayor and the council to be mindful with their budget ax.

Trees and Webstreaming

The council also approved legislation ([Intro 311](#)) Wednesday to require the Department of Parks and Recreation to notify school and hospital officials 30 days before it plants trees near entrances.

Councilmember James Oddo, the sponsor of the bill, said the proposal emerged after the parks department planted trees in an area designated for student drop off at a Staten Island school.

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It was approved unanimously.

Wednesday also marked the first day of the council's [new web streaming service](#) . The council will stream its twice-monthly stated meetings live on its Web site.