

Senate Panel to Take Up Juvenile Justice Grant Measure

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The Senate Judiciary Committee is scheduled Thursday to take up legislation to reauthorize a federal grant program aimed at improving state juvenile justice systems.

The measure (S 3155), sponsored by Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., would reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (PL 93-415).

Passed in 1974, the law provides grants to states that separate youth offenders from adult prisoners, limit the detention of youth for low-level offenses and seek to reduce overrepresentation of minority youth offenders. It was last reauthorized in 2002.

The bill would permit states to allow youths convicted in adult court to serve their sentences in juvenile facilities without facing penalties. Under current law, states can be penalized for doing so.

"After years of pressure to try more and more young people as adults and to send them to adult prisons, it is time to seriously consider the strong evidence that this policy is not working," Leahy said in a statement.

The measure also would limit the ability of judges to order non-delinquent-status offenders, such as those who are truant, run away or violate curfew, alcohol and tobacco laws, to be held in juvenile lockups.

The Justice Department would be required to report annually on state use of isolation and restraints in juvenile detention and corrections facilities.

Authorized funding for prevention programs such as mentoring and aftercare would be increased and states would be able to direct grants for mental health and substance abuse training and treatment.

"Through mentoring and other programs, this act will help to prevent delinquency and promote rehabilitation, so that young offenders are less likely to become stuck in the criminal justice system," said Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, the committee's ranking Republican and a co-sponsor of the bill.

The committee is scheduled to meet at 11:30 a.m. in 226 Dirksen.

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