

Juvenile home director resigns

Superintendent quit Jan. 2 but will serve until he's replaced

By Ofelia Casillas
Tribune staff reporter

The upheaval at the top levels of the beleaguered Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center continued Thursday as Supt. J.W. Fairman confirmed that he had resigned, and Circuit Court Chief Judge Timothy Evans said he stands ready to replace county government as overseer of the facility.

Evans addressed the future of the center for the first time since County Board President Todd Stroger said Wednesday he is willing to cede control of the juvenile home to the court.

"The proposal itself is certainly not without merit," said Evans, a former Chicago alderman who has been chief judge since 2001.

"The court has been a national leader in juvenile justice reform, and we've become a national model," he said, "because of our alternative efforts to juvenile detention, that is to say, a means of helping children without incarcer-



Fairman

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ating them."

Fairman, who took over as the center's top administrator Aug. 1, submitted his resignation on Jan. 2, county officials revealed Thursday.

Fairman offered to remain on the job through June 1 as the center works to comply with a federal plan announced earlier this week, said Steve Mayberry, spokesman for Stroger.

During that time, the county, together with the chief judge and local bar associations, will conduct a national search for a new superintendent.

"The chief judge has to live with it," Mayberry said of the hiring decision. "So the chief judge will certainly be involved significantly."

Cook County Public Guardian Robert Harris predicted that Evans, who also oversees the guardian's office, would be an effective leader for the juvenile center without micromanaging.

"He comes from a political background, and I've seen him in action," Harris said. "He's extremely polished. He's not a pushover at all. I think he's savvy about county government."

"In terms of my day-to-day, he lets me do my thing. Obviously, I'm his appointee. But pretty much, I'm independent. He's very supportive," the public guardian said. "For me, he's accessible. If I call him and I need something, he responds."

On Wednesday, Rep. Tom Cross (R-Oswego) filed the necessary legislation to put Evans in charge of the juvenile center—a move recommended in a report released Thursday by the Chicago Bar Association.

The change could come within six months, after the Stroger administration tries to effect reforms. Violence, cleanliness and lack of appropriate health care at the facility have been issues in a federal lawsuit filed in 1999 by the American Civil Liberties Union.

"It is a historical day for the Cook County juvenile justice system," said Chicago Bar Association President Kevin Durkin at a news conference Thursday.

Cross said he first filed a bill to transfer control of the detention center to Evans in October 2005 but



Evans

"couldn't get a call" back from then-Cook County Board President John Stroger. "There were some suggestions that, perhaps, he wasn't supportive of it," Cross said. "But the bottom line and the good news is his son Todd is supportive, as are a number of other people. So, it's good."

Cook County State's Atty. Richard Devine said that given the Juvenile Court's history of "balanced and restorative" justice, "it's only right that we retain leadership in this area."

"We commit our cooperation" to the shift in control, Devine said.

In a statement Thursday, Stroger repeated that he fully supports the change.

"This will provide a more seamless process for all in-

involved in the juvenile justice system," he said.

Founded in 1907, the center was one of the first juvenile detention facilities in the country. Decades later, it exceeded its capacity of roughly 500.

In the 1990s, advocates say, the center's population exploded, with as many as 800 children living in chaos, sleeping in common areas and medical units.

With a push by experts to find alternatives in the 1990s, the population dropped to roughly 600, and advocates hoped problems could be solved.

But with continuing leadership problems at the center, ACLU attorneys sued the county in 1999, citing violent, unhealthy and unsanitary conditions.

Officials with the bar association hope transferring oversight of the detention center to the chief judge will improve the qualifications of employees at the center, bringing them in line with standards used by the probation department.

All new hires would be required to have a college degree, but the existing staff would be exempted, according to the report.

The transfer would also increase consistency in training across Juvenile Court departments and give the detention center access to additional funding, according to the report.

The bar association report, much like other expert reports in recent months, also recommends improvements in education, visitation and sports and recreation programming, as well as better access to proper food, clothing and bedding.

Tribune staff reporter Mickey Ciokajlo contributed to this report.

ocasillas@tribune.com