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EDITORIALS

Stroger's wise move

The new Cook County Board president, Todd Stroger, has managed to surprise with his demands that the bloated county bureaucracy drastically reduce its spending. This week, he surprised again by agreeing to give up control of the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center and turn it over to the chief judge of the Circuit Court.

Shifting oversight of Cook County's troubled juvenile detention facility, as recommended Thursday by the Chicago Bar Association, is a good idea. Here's why: Board presidents get elected by grateful patronage armies to whom the president has given jobs. Chief judges are elected by Circuit Court judges. No judge needs a bloated, unqualified patronage army for job security.

Thus, the chances the juvenile detention center will continue to be staffed and run by unqualified political loyalists (i.e. campaign workers) will drop significantly.

There's a fighting chance that the place will be run by qualified folks who are committed to transforming the lives of kids in crisis.

Stroger made a campaign promise to replace juvenile center Supt. J.W. Fairman. Stroger officials say they plan to initiate a national search for Fairman's replacement, but they will leave it to Chief Judge Timothy Evans to make a final pick. Timeline: at least six months.

Politicians don't tend to give up jobs and turf very easily. Stroger is to be commended.

The shift only makes sense. In every other county of the state, all 101 of them, the chief judge runs the juvenile home.

The measure has to be passed by the state legislature. On Wednesday, House Minority Leader Tom Cross (R-Oswego) filed legislation to make it happen. He filed it initially in October 2005, with no response.

Now, after the umpteenth report detailing horrid conditions and treatment at the juvenile cen-

ter, and thanks to Stroger's blessing, expect a stampede of legislators of all political stripes eager for sponsorship. State Rep. David Miller (D-Calumet City) and state Rep. Jim Durkin (R-Western Springs) already have signed on as co-sponsors. The House and Senate leadership needs to get behind this.

Changing control at the juvenile center will be a start. But the facility has seen a lot of false starts in the last 18 months, since the Tribune's editorial board detailed filthy conditions, abuse of kids, staff members with criminal records and incompetent leadership at the center.

Again to his credit, Stroger says he is committed to spending the next six months implementing the latest court-ordered reform plan for the center—all 129

pages of it—issued earlier this week. Godspeed.

The Chicago Bar Association offered a number of other good recommendations. Chief among them was a suggestion that juvenile detention in Cook County be decentralized. Research shows smaller facilities allow staffers to be more responsive to kids' varying needs, and allow youths to be located closer to their families.

Efforts to bring change to the center have been going on for years, with little result. Lest anyone forget, the juvenile center houses 450 kids on a typical day. Amid all these starts and delays and court actions and changes in leadership, they wait because they have no other choice.

For every day we defer the difficult cultural and personnel changes needed inside the juvenile detention center, another opportunity to change a young life is lost.

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