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Children's Rights

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Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and his colleagues on the Senate Judiciary Committee, should show up for kids.

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2008, the most important juvenile justice legislation Congress has addressed in years, is up for consideration in the Senate next week. This critical bill, which has strong bipartisan support, would improve public safety by reforming the juvenile justice system. It would increase mental health and drug treatment services for youth, improve confinement conditions and reduce disproportionate sanctions for minor adolescent misbehavior.

The effective prevention, mental health and drug treatment programs called for in the bill would help children exit the criminal justice system, return to school and become responsible, productive citizens.

Three Republicans and three Democrats have co-sponsored the bill, which would reduce crime and enhance public safety.

Unfortunately, the bill is going nowhere fast, unless members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, on which Sen. Hatch serves, show up for their committee hearings.

When the Senate Judiciary Committee was scheduled to consider the bill, Republicans refused to attend. Upset about an unrelated issue (lack of time to discuss judicial nominations), Republicans boycotted the committee, which can't proceed without a quorum.

If the committee doesn't convene, the legislation doesn't get heard. And 100,000 children in this country who are confined in juvenile detention and residential facilities, often plagued by harsh and abusive conditions, will pay the price. In Utah, 1,232 children locked in 22 different facilities will be affected. So will society at large.

Current juvenile justice practices ignore children's age and amenability to rehabilitation and threaten community safety. Almost 10,000 children in the United States are held in adult jails and prisons, where their size and youth render them vulnerable to victimization.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that, after release, children incarcerated in adult prisons commit more crimes, and more serious crimes, than children with similar histories held in juvenile facilities. In Utah, 41 youth were certified into the adult criminal justice system last year.

The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health reports 80 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system suffer from mental health or substance abuse disorders. Those youth are too often denied essential treatment that could change the trajectory of their lives and prevent crime.

Status offenders are still held too often in locked facilities in this country. Status offenders are youth who engage in non-criminal offenses such as running away or truancy conduct that would not be considered criminal if committed by an adult.

Research reveals that commingling status offenders with delinquent youth increases crime, further compromising public safety. Fortunately, Utah's state law already prohibits lock-up of status offenders. The juvenile bill would encourage other states to follow Utah's positive example.

Sen. Hatch says he is steadfast in his "dedication to consider and introduce any appropriate federal legislation which might limit the

effects of crime in our communities." This bill is a prime example of such legislation.

There is no question that the issue of judicial nominations is important and deserves attention. But the Senate should not throw out the baby with the bathwater and deny children help because of unrelated concerns.

Sen. Hatch and the entire Senate Judiciary Committee should show up to the next hearing and make a critical difference for children. Children should not have to pay the price of partisan bickering.

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