

Judges Sentenced

Kids for Cash

Editorial - January 28, 2009



The judges, Luzerne County President Judge Mark A. Ciavarella Jr., 58, and his predecessor, Senior Judge Michael T. Conahan, 56, will serve seven years in jail under a plea agreement.

The setting is Pennsylvania coal country, but it's a story right out of Dickens' grim 19th-century landscape: Two of Luzerne County's most senior judges on Monday were accused of sending children to jail in return for kickbacks.

They're alleged to have pocketed \$2.6 million in payments from juvenile detention center operators.

When a federal judge reviews their plea, though, the question ought to be whether the punishment is adequate -- along with the judges being bounced from the bench, disbarred, and losing their pensions.

If the allegations are true, Ciavarella and Conahan were involved in a disgraceful cabal far worse than one that merely lined their pockets.

First, the judges helped the detention centers land a county contract worth \$58 million. Then their alleged scheme was to guarantee the operators a steady income by detaining juveniles, often on petty stuff.

Many of the kids were railroaded, according to allegations lodged with the state

Supreme Court last year by the Philadelphia-based Juvenile Law Center, an advocacy group.

In asking the court to intervene in April, the law center cited hundreds of examples where teens accused of minor mischief were pressured to waive their right to lawyers, and then shipped to a detention center.

One teen was given a 90-day sentence for having parodied a school administrator online. Such unwarranted detentions left "both children and parents feeling bewildered, violated, and traumatized," center lawyers said.

"Very few people would stand up" to the Luzerne judges, according to the law center's executive director, Robert G. Schwartz.

Fortunately, Juvenile Law Center was willing to do so, along with backing from state Attorney General Tom Corbett's office and the state Department of Public Welfare.

The blind justices on the state's high court, though, took a pass. Only last month, they offered no explanation in declining to take up the law center's request that the court step up.

Now, the state Supreme Court should revisit the issue, since the scope of corruption alleged at the Luzerne County Courthouse in Wilkes-Barre could further undermine confidence in the courts statewide.

Authorities need to redress running roughshod over juveniles' rights -- a process also likely to bring damage suits. While the local district attorney pledges to "do our best to right the situation," this calls for an independent, outside review.

The two judges' downfall may have rooted out the worst perpetrators of this evil scheme, but the abuse of power alleged in Luzerne County is so startling that it should send shock waves for reform around the state court system.