



ON THE BALLOT

A Report from the Bureau
of Governmental Research

JEFFERSON JUVENILE SERVICES TAX RENEWAL, NOVEMBER 6, 2018

IN BRIEF

Jefferson Parish voters will decide whether to renew a 3.5-mill, 10-year property tax dedicated to juvenile services. The Parish projects the tax would yield an estimated \$12.1 million annually. If voters renew the tax it would run from 2021 through 2030.

Key Background and Findings

- Renewal of the tax would reset its current rolled-back rate of 3.32 mills to the previously authorized maximum rate of 3.5 mills. This would result in a slight tax increase of 0.18 mills, beginning in 2021. For example, the tax for a homestead-exempt property valued at \$220,000 would increase \$2.65 from \$48.80 to \$51.45 a year.
- Jefferson is one of five parishes with its own department responsible for both pre-trial juvenile detention and juvenile probation services. The Department of Juvenile Services runs the L. Robert Rivarde Memorial Home, a detention center, and operates two other offices. It monitors youths on probation and provides them with various evidence-based therapies.
- In 2017 millage revenue accounted for 93% (\$11.3 million) of Juvenile Services' total revenue of \$12.2 million. The department's total expenditures in 2017 were \$10.9 million, but annual expenditures will increase by an estimated \$850,000 beginning in 2019. The increase will result from implementation of Louisiana's "Raise the Age" law, which will initially route all 17-year-olds through the juvenile justice system, and salary increases mandated by the new Parish pay plan.
- Between 2011 and 2017 Jefferson Parish juvenile detention admissions fell by 30% and the number of youths on probation fell by 60%. The reduction in detention was driven by falling juvenile arrests and implementation of a new detention assessment instrument introduced by Juvenile Services. Decreased arrests and expansion of the District Attorney's diversion program drove the reduction in youths on probation. As the number of youths on probation fell, Juvenile Services began making evidence-based therapies available to youths in the diversion program as well as those on probation.
- Juvenile Services also reduced its probation caseload per officer from 30 in 2008 to 10 in 2017. This aligns with best-practice recommendations of eight to 12 youths per officer.
- The department's recidivism rate fell from 29% in 2010 to 15% in 2017.
- BGR evaluated whether the tax is necessary. Juvenile Services depends on the tax for 93% of its revenue. Jefferson Parish's General Fund could not cover the costs of Juvenile Services without cutting the other services it currently funds. Loss of substantial revenue would force Juvenile Services to discontinue its probation services, and send Jefferson Parish youth into the State's overstressed probation system, where the average caseload per officer is 51 youths. Juvenile Services would also be unable to pay the costs required to operate its detention facility. It would close the facility, leaving the Parish no guaranteed option for pre-trial detention for high-risk youths.
- BGR evaluated whether the tax is appropriately sized. While Juvenile Services ended 2017 with a fund balance of \$8.6 million, new costs from 17-year-olds entering the juvenile justice system and the new Parish pay plan could lead to operating deficits beginning in 2019. The department plans to use any remaining reserves to build a new East Bank office better suited to the needs of the youth and families it serves.
- Finally, BGR evaluated whether the tax revenue will be well spent. Juvenile Services has implemented numerous reforms and made evidence-based therapies available to youths in diversion who otherwise had to pay or re-enter the juvenile justice system to gain access. Recidivism has fallen as the department implemented reforms.

BGR Position

FOR. Jefferson Parish's Juvenile Services Department has used the tax to deliver professional treatment and regular supervision to youth who enter the juvenile justice system. The department has implemented evidence-based practices and reforms recommended by national juvenile justice advocacy organizations to demonstrably reduce incarceration and probation while also lowering rates of recidivism. Without the tax revenue, which provides almost all of its budget, Juvenile Services would have no substantial alternative funding source to operate its detention facility. This would leave Juvenile Court judges no guaranteed option for detention of even the highest-risk youth. In addition, the department would be unable to pay for probation officers, thus forcing the Parish to depend on the State's Office of Juvenile Justice for juvenile probation services. That office's probation caseload per officer already far exceeds recommended standards, and likely could not provide parish youth with the same level of support they receive from Juvenile Services. With implementation of a new State law that processes 17-year-olds in the juvenile justice system, Juvenile Services' costs will grow. Maintaining sufficient funding will be necessary to ensure that the department can continue to provide the same level of service.