Karen Matthews: The Victorian Government needs to close the revolving door of youth justice

Karen Matthews, Geelong Advertiser
November 12, 2016 12:00am

IT'S time for the Victorian Government to extract the digit and toughen the hell up on youth crime. And I'm not talking about more police either, though God knows we could do with a few more of those as well. No, it's about putting a stop to the revolving door of youth justice by doing something completely different, like taking a strong and decisive approach to putting the brakes on skyrocketing juvenile crime.

The problems facing Victorians at present are not the result of a police shortage but the legacy of successive state governments that have allowed the steady watering down of the juvenile justice system to the point that it has become virtually ineffectual. Just ask the young crooks as they leave the court punching the air in celebration and boasting to anyone who will listen how they got away with it again. So how about we try something a little different?

Like ditching the softly, softly feather duster approach towards young criminals and paying a little more mind to protecting the lives and property of every other law-abiding member of the community. Not too much to ask, is it? Instead of repeatedly going down the same tired old path of rehab, rehab and more rehab, how about teaching them...
about taking responsibility for their actions and that there are consequences for criminal offending, if not in the Children’s Court, certainly when they hit the big time? Wouldn’t it be better to get the message across now before they’ve gone too far down the path?

Youth supervision orders, probation and bail conditions mean absolutely nothing to the current run of young criminals who know full well that no matter how many times they breach an order or reoffend, their age entitles them to a granting of bail and, with it, a free pass to resume offending.

Victoria’s youth justice system has become a joke.

If we want to get the message across we are going to have to change our way of dealing with juvenile crime.

Heading my wish list of changes would be:

- **REDUCING** the maximum age of young people fronting the Children’s Court jurisdiction from 18 to 17;
- **INTRODUCING** the compulsory taking of DNA samples from all serial juvenile criminal offenders to allow police to investigate and solve crimes with greater speed and efficiency;
- **ALLOWING** the publication of names and photos of repeat juvenile offenders to create greater public awareness and also assist detection;
- **INTRODUCING** a one-strike-and-you’re-going-inside approach in relation to reoffending while on bail;
- **HAVING** all victims’ claims for restitution borne by the accused’s parents or the body responsible for the child’s care and welfare at the time of offending;
- **GIVING** all victims of youth crime the opportunity to address the hearing so that young offenders are made blatantly aware of the financial, physical and emotional hardship they have caused through their offending;
- **GIVING** Department of Human Services residential care staff greater powers to restrict the movements of youths under their supervision, instead of having to run and lock themselves in an office or face being beaten up by them;
- **RESERVING** all DHS residential facilities solely for young people who have demonstrated the ability to obey the law and abide by house rules; and
- **COMPLETELY** overhauling the current Children’s Court legislation to provide greater powers to magistrates, with a clear focus on community protection and with sentences geared to fit the crime.

At the end of the day, if we want to address juvenile crime, the rampant car thefts, burglaries, thefts, property destruction, assaults and dangerous high speed driving in stolen cars, recently resulting in deaths and serious injury, we are all going to toughen up. And it is up to the State Government to show that it can step up to the plate and make the changes so desperately needed if we are ever to show young people that crime really doesn’t pay.