



Ongoing TYC reforms discussed at Austin forum

By Celinda Emison
Wednesday, June 25, 2008

AUSTIN -- The Texas Youth Commission has made sweeping changes over the past year since abuse scandals rocked the agency, but TYC and state officials say there is more work to be done.

The state of the TYC, which still is reeling from charges of physical and sexual abuse at facilities in Brownwood and West Texas, was discussed Wednesday during a forum in Austin sponsored by the Texas Public Policy Foundation and the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition.

"One thing I can tell you is that you are not alone," said TYC Conservator Richard Nedelkoff, who has worked in the juvenile justice system in several other states. "This is a national issue, but right now the eyes and attention of Texas and the rest of the country are on us."

A number of reforms, laid out in Senate Bill 103, which passed last year, have been accomplished.

State Rep. Jerry Madden (R-Plano), who chairs the House Committee on Corrections, applauded the improvements.

After the passage of SB103, Nedelkoff was named the conservator of the agency; offices were established for an inspector general and a special prosecutor; and an ombudsman post was created to root out abuses.

In addition, the agency conducted criminal background checks on all employees to prevent sexual predators from working at TYC. The background checks resulted in numerous firings throughout the agency. A hot line was established for the public to report any abuse, neglect or improper activities, and a parents bill of rights has been drawn up.

The agency also has begun to install more security cameras in each facility. The project should be complete by August.

Work is ongoing on other reforms, which include reducing the population at TYC.

One way officials are doing this is by capping the age of offenders at 18. This means all offenders will be paroled or sent to adult prisons when they turn 18.

"We are in the process of removing all misdemeanor offenders from TYC," Madden said. "We will also be removing all 19- and 20-year-olds."

Madden said the population is down from more than 4,700 youths to about 2,200 presently.

"Our goal is to get that number to between 1,700 and 1,800," Madden said.

Other goals, such as establishing long-term rehabilitation facilities and halfway houses, have not been met.

"This is critical to reduce recidivism," Madden said.

Nedelkoff said staff recruitment continues to be a problem.

In the past, it has been suggested that TYC close altogether, but officials say a more regional approach may be the answer. The idea is to keep the youths close to home and to provide other services, such as reintegration, education, halfway houses and mental health care in each region.

"We need other facilities, too, and we have a long way to go," Nedelkoff said.

Regionalizing the facilities could mean moving youths from one TYC unit to another. Last year, the Ron Jackson Unit in Brownwood became an all-female facility. It is unknown whether males will be placed back into the facility as a result of the reforms.



© Abilene Reporter-News