

Editorial

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A bold idea

Consider abolishing the Texas Youth Commission and let counties handle juvenile offenders.

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With a budget of more than \$235 million, the Texas Youth Commission system currently holds about 2,800 young offenders. It maintains a costly bureaucracy with more than 4,100 employees, yet still cannot fill 440 positions to maintain an adequate guard/inmate ratio.

John Whitmire, the Houston Democrat who chairs the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, figures that's a prohibitive cost to taxpayers for housing a population that could fit into a typical Texas high school.

After growing frustrated with efforts to reform TYC, Whitmire has come up with a sensible plan that would effectively abolish the agency and delegate its juvenile corrections duties to county or regional authorities.

He believes the move would save millions. Aside from the financial considerations, there are other good reasons, starting with the shocking treatment of teens in state custody.

For the kind of tuition footed by the public, you'd think the state agency would be providing its troubled youth with top-flight facilities and educational and therapeutic programs. Instead, it has been wracked by scandal for the past year following revelations that young inmates in an isolated West Texas penal facility were coerced into sexual activities with administrators.

Two months ago, acting director Dimitria Pope was forced out after accusations that she had ignored an agency ombudsman's warnings about unsanitary facilities and excessive use of mace and solitary confinement on young inmates. The TYC system is hobbled by the fact many of its facilities are far from the urban settings that produce up to 90 percent of its wards. That makes it difficult for families to maintain contact, to recruit employees, and for adequate oversight of conditions, treatment programs and medical care.

"We have been trying to reform a system by throwing money at an infrastructure that is structurally unsound and outdated," said Whitmire.

According to the senator, many larger counties already have juvenile corrections capabilities that could do the job using the funding currently budgeted for TYC. Whitmire says he intends to ensure that state dollars follow the offender without creating unfunded local liabilities.

In the case of the most violent offenders, a single high-security state facility might be needed. Whitmire says Harris County officials and judges he's talked to are enthusiastic about the idea, believing that it will be easier to monitor the court-ordered treatment of offenders and get better results.

There are vested interests that will fight to preserve the current TYC arrangement, particularly legislators whose districts are home to reform schools and depend on them for economic benefits. For some rural school districts, the TYC students make up a substantial part of their enrollment.

Those limited interests cannot justify continuing the poor conditions and treatment of young inmates in state custody or maintenance of an expensive state bureaucracy to oversee a relatively small group of offenders. There's got to be a better way to do it, and Whitmire's proposal is pointing in the right direction.

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Gritsforsbreakfast wrote:

Well, part of it is that the Lege budgeted TYC at 98% of its last budget, then the last E.D. sent a bunch of kids home and basically cut the inmate population in half. So the budget stuff is quite overstated.

Texas needs to fix TYC, but everyone please STOP thinking you can do so by saving money. Building infrastructure in the counties (and Harris needs it most) will be very expensive, and fought at every step by NIMBYs. Face facts: You can't do mass incarceration on the cheap, for juveniles or adults.

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