

## Hunt on for juvenile detainee beds

County considers Eagle Lake facility now that TYC no longer an option

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By BILL MURPHY

Harris County officials are looking at sending more than 140 juvenile detainees to a Colorado County facility as the Juvenile Probation Department scrambles to absorb hundreds of offenders the Texas Youth Commission no longer will accept.

The county could buy or lease an abandoned, but relatively new, juvenile facility in Eagle Lake and have it running in two months, Bill Hawkins, head of the Harris County District Attorney's juvenile division, said at Thursday's county juvenile board meeting.

Without additional facilities, the county runs the risk that potentially dangerous youths who formerly were detained in local or TYC lockups will be out on the street, committing more crimes, Hawkins said.

"Juvenile recidivism is up," he said. "The outcomes are not as good as when the kids were being held longer."

According to Juvenile Probation Department Director Harvey Hetzel, youth offenders are serving shorter periods in county detention after their cases have been settled.

In 2004, the average stay was 58 days, Hetzel said. That has shrunk to 38 this year. Hetzel said he expects the average stay to hit 35 days as TYC's new policy effects are felt.

Harris County's juvenile probation facilities regularly have been cited for overcrowding by a state-monitoring agency in recent years.

Without additional detention space, that overcrowding could worsen because state lawmakers this year barred TYC from accepting youths convicted of misdemeanors, Hetzel said.

Last year, the county sent 425 juveniles to TYC for misdemeanor offenses.

Most were chronic offenders, and many did not curb criminal behavior after being detained at the county's juvenile bootcamp or other facilities, Hawkins said. Some originally were charged with felonies, including assault and drug dealing, but struck misdemeanor plea deals.

The governor's office and the Legislature sought to reform the TYC after a sex abuse scandal at a remote West Texas facility surfaced last February. The probe mushroomed, and lawmakers began looking at problems at far-flung TYC facilities and headquarters.

"The state has pushed back through the pipeline these kids we were legitimately sending to them," State District Judge Pat Shelton, one of the county's three juvenile judges, said earlier this week.

Youths sent to TYC included chronic shoplifters, and those who repeatedly took part in assaults and engaged in criminal mischief, Shelton said.

"What do you do if they are doing this every week, but you don't have the alternative sanction of TYC anymore?" he asked.

The state is providing Harris County with additional funding — \$5.8 million — to defray the costs of detaining more youths during the next three years.

The \$5.8 million represents only part of the expense of taking on an additional 425 youths a year, Hetzel said.

It would cost the county \$6 million to \$7 million a year to operate the Eagle Lake facility, and it will serve only 144 youths, he said.

### **Staffing concerns**

Those operational costs, he said, don't include the cost of buying or leasing the facility, which was built in the 1990s.

District Attorney Chuck Rosenthal has offered to give the probation department \$2.2 million to help buy or lease in Eagle Lake. The money would come from assets forfeited by criminals, Hawkins said.

Eagle Lake is about 65 miles west of downtown Houston in a sparsely populated area. The facility would need a staff of 125, most of whom would come from the surrounding area.

Hetzel said he was worried he may not be able to find enough staff for the facility.

"I have difficulty staffing our boot camp in Katy," he said.

The juvenile board authorized using some of the \$5.8 million to put youths in private detention facilities in Texas.

But with too few detention beds, more youths who used to be detained in local or TYC lockups will be placed on probation, Hetzel said. Others will serve shorter sentences before being released on probation.

More than \$800,000 of the \$5.8 million will pay for expanding programs that monitor youths released from detention and aiding them in living productive lives.

County juvenile detention facilities are being expanded and soon will have 470 beds for those whose cases have been decided, and 250 beds for others.

Commissioners Court likely will ask voters this November to approve \$76 million in bonds to convert the jail at 1301 Franklin into a juvenile facility.

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