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TYC admits rehab failure

Amid counselor shortage, program flaws, grads of drug treatment likelier to re-offend

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The Texas Youth Commission's drug treatment program produces graduates who are more likely to re-offend after release than addicted inmates who did not participate.

While TYC has known internally for years that the effectiveness of its chemical dependency program was negligible at best, officials continued to boast of its groundbreaking rehabilitation work with delinquent juveniles to state legislators.

New leaders at TYC say they recognize the failings and are vowing reform. But they face a series of obstacles endemic to a juvenile corrections system that operates mostly in remote rural areas.

They also blame a broader rehabilitation program that was designed to provide youthful offenders with skills to turn their lives around. The program, known as Resocialization, once was touted as a national model but fell from favor because staff used it to arbitrarily extend the amount of time inmates served.

TYC told the Sunset Advisory Commission in late August that Resocialization's one-size-fits-all approach gutted the therapeutic impact of the chemical dependency program.

The lack of effective drug treatment reflects a fundamental failure of TYC's mission to "fix broken children." More than 80 percent of delinquents committed to TYC are identified as being at risk for drug or alcohol abuse, a major contributor to criminal conduct. The report found that inmates who participated in the drug program committed new crimes at a rate of two percentage points higher than nonparticipants.

Dimitria Pope, who became acting executive director in June, said she quickly concluded that neither the chemical dependency program nor Resocialization was working properly because both were designed by TYC staff in a vacuum.

"You had a number of Ph.D.-level white females who sat and wrote programming and a concept," Ms. Pope said. "In theory, it looked great. But you didn't have anyone who tested this on the population."

Phyllis Giambrone said she recognized the drug program's shortcomings soon after being hired as TYC's director of substance abuse services three years ago.

"This is the first time I've put it down on paper," she said, "but previous managers that I've had were aware of my concerns and need to change the program."

It wasn't until the leadership turnover this year, in the wake of an inmate sex abuse scandal, that Ms. Giambrone said she was urged to pursue reforms. She wrote the section on chemical dependency submitted to the advisory commission, which will recommend whether TYC should continue to exist.

TYC is in the early stages of developing a new approach to drug treatment along with a new overall rehabilitation program called CoNEXTions, Ms. Giambrone said. The new program is meant to eliminate a punitive approach that plagued Resocialization.

While juvenile justice researchers credited TYC for acknowledging the flaws in its chemical dependency program, some said they remained skeptical the reforms will succeed.

"It is going to take some significant re-engineering and dedicated funding from the state to turn this thing around," said William Kelly, a University of Texas sociology professor who has studied the TYC chemical dependency treatment program. "Otherwise, the youth in TYC will continue to cycle through the revolving door of juvenile justice until they graduate to the adult system."

Dr. Kelly concluded in a 2001 evaluation that TYC's chemical dependency program was ineffective. Although TYC officials were aware of the study, Dr. Kelly said, they had no official response.

A dwindling pool

At the top of its to-do list, the agency must resolve persistent difficulties with attracting and retaining qualified counselors to work in its rural locations.

An internal audit in 2005 found that high caseworker-to-youth ratios meant some counselors were "carrying larger, sometimes even double caseloads due to high staff turnover." Vacancies could last for up to a year, the agency stated.

Some units required counselors to work extra shifts as guards, clerks or supervisors in the cafeteria to cover for an overall shortage of workers.

The situation may become even more dire because of a newly enacted TYC policy that restricts the hiring of former offenders.

The vast majority of chemical dependency counselors are recovering addicts, many of whom have criminal records. When TYC implemented its new policy last spring, it lost almost 20 percent of its counseling staff overnight. That cut into what was an already short-staffed operation at many youth prisons.

"It's going to severely hurt them, and they are going to miss out on some of the best counselors," said Scott Bevers, who was fired from his counselor's job at the Gainesville prison unit because of an 18-year-old cocaine possession case.

About 4,300 people are licensed by the Texas Department of State Health Services to be chemical dependency counselors.

But the pool is dwindling, said Phyllis Gardner, president of the Texas Association of Addiction Professionals and a professor at Texarkana College.

"There's graying of the workforce," she said. "But you also have the problem that it is such an incredibly, shamefully low-paying profession. ... In the government system, you're going to be lucky to make \$24,000 a year."

In five of the seven counties where TYC now operates chemical dependency treatment programs, the number of licensed counselors has dropped since 2002.

Ms. Giambrone said the number of applicants for counseling positions that has emerged in recent months encourages her. She attributed the jump to a salary increase the Legislature approved for counselors beginning in September.

The locations of TYC facilities pose another challenge. Many successful treatment programs involve family members and people from the inmate's home community. One-third of inmates are from large urban counties far from the prisons.

'Toothless lions'

Drug dependency is among the most intractable problems the juvenile justice system faces. Not only are many juvenile inmates addicts, they often come from families or neighborhoods where drug or alcohol abuse is common.

The Legislature recognized the need in the early 1990s when it mandated TYC to provide chemical dependency treatment as part of its overall rehabilitation program.

Only about a third of TYC inmates who are identified as chemically dependent get addiction treatment. About 65 percent complete the program.

TYC receives \$5 million annually in state funds for chemical dependency and five other specialized treatment programs. Federal and state grants provided an additional \$1.4 million for drug treatment alone. By comparison, the agency received almost \$20 million a year for medical care.

Drug treatment services consist of about 20 hours per week of counseling and drug education. The program is designed to take between six and nine months, although the average completion time has been 14 months.

Mr. Bevers, the former TYC counselor in Gainesville, said a correctional mind-set by administrators often trumped treatment needs. Inmates pulled from the program would have their stays extended and guards often cut short counseling for other activities.

"Overall, it was a failure in my mind," he said. "Mainly because we weren't allowed to keep the kids accountable for their actions. We were like toothless lions."

About 81 percent of chemical dependency program graduates committed new felonies or misdemeanor drug crimes within three years of release from TYC. The recidivism rate for released addicts who did not participate in the drug program was 79 percent, the agency reported in 2006.

Throughout the 1990s, the agency routinely reported that its chemical dependency program was reducing recidivism rates. As early as 1999, the agency began reporting figures that showed less and less difference between the recidivism rates of participants and nonparticipants in the drug program.

David Walenta, head of the TYC's youth services division, blamed the deterioration of the drug program's fortunes on a lack of trained staff and a related shift in the Resocialization program toward a more correctional approach.

If the agency knew it had a problem with its chemical dependency program, it did not make that information clear to legislators with oversight of TYC.

Toby Goodman, a former House member from Arlington who was vice chairman of the Juvenile Justice Committee until last year, said he did not recall anything but positive reports from TYC about its drug treatment program.

"The numbers that I recall were indicating that it was working," he said. "Otherwise, we wouldn't have funded it, or we would have restructured the program."

Mr. Bevers said administrators were obsessed with generating figures that would bolster the agency's funding requests.

He said his bosses instructed him to do anything necessary to ensure that every inmate assigned to the treatment program successfully completed it.

"They told us if they showed up, there was a warm body in the chair for an acceptable amount of time – regardless of what they made on the test – to pass them. It didn't matter if they learned the material or not, they were to be passed," he said.

Most participants didn't deserve to graduate, Mr. Bevers said. They disdained the counseling and cheated on the tests. Some couldn't read. Only a small fraction were serious about sobriety, he said.

He knew most of his students would be back in trouble, especially if their families had not demonstrated support for their recovery.

"They weren't making it in there," Mr. Bevers said. "If they weren't making it in there, why would they make it on the outside?"

'Spittin' in the wind'

The state also appropriates \$9 million for parole services, which include substance abuse treatment by private counselors. A *Dallas Morning News* analysis of figures provided to the state comptroller's office showed that over the past five years, TYC paid \$2.4 million to about 100 private care providers.

TYC requires drug abusers to have a treatment plan when they leave. But poor communication between TYC treatment staff and parole officers has meant some youths never received the counseling services they needed.

The agency stated in its 2005 review that inmate files often did not include information on youth counseling needs and referrals after parole. Three former TYC counselors said they had little contact with private after-care providers.

Addiction experts and some of the private counselors who work with TYC say that the amount of time in treatment isn't enough to prepare them to return to what are often troubled households and neighborhoods.

"When it comes to adolescents, you need longer care treatment," said Dr. Gardner, who worked as an addiction counselor for 10 years. "If you're going to take the kids and put them right back into the same dysfunctional system, what do you expect we'll get? We're just spittin' in the wind."

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