

TYC adrift

State inaction in rebuilding management of the scandal-tarred Texas Youth Commission invites more trouble

Editorial

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Revelations of the abuse of teenagers at an isolated Texas Youth Commission facility in West Texas last February led to the shake-up of the state agency and the forced resignation of its leadership and board. During the legislative session lawmakers passed a bill mandating the appointment of a commissioner and a temporary advisory board to be eventually replaced by a seven-member governing board.

Unfortunately, as public outrage subsided and press coverage of the TYC dwindled, so did the urgency in reshaping the battered youth justice system in the state. A conservator appointed by Gov. Rick Perry, Ed Owens, has now retired, leaving the acting executive director, Dimitria Pope, to run the agency while reporting to the governor and three legislative committees. Perry has yet to act on the legislative mandate to appoint an oversight board.

The TYC continues to have management problems. In the first month of its budget cycle in September, it spent more than half its annual allotment for overtime. As a result, correctional officers are now working overtime, but the payments are withheld while officials study spending patterns.

Pope has had her hands full. She had to close down one agency detention unit run by a private operator in West Texas last month while defending conditions at a state-run facility, Victory Field, in Vernon. The agency's ombudsman called Victory Field an unacceptably violent place.

One of Pope's executives who was recruited to reform the TYC, Texas prison system veteran Billy Humphrey, has been accused of retaliating against employees who reported the inappropriate use of pepper spray and solitary confinement of inmates.

In a meeting with the Texas House Correctional Committee, Pope expressed concerns that there may be more scandals as yet uncovered in the agency. She is not alone. State Rep. Scott Hochberg, D-Houston, the committee vice chair, says the lack of governing structure for the TYC and the latest problems "lead me and the rest of the members of my committee to an uneasiness. I talked to the committee chair [Plano's Jerry Madden, a Republican] last week, and he said, 'I feel like a shoe is going to drop, and I don't know where it's coming from, and I don't know how to stop it.' "

It's unfair to expect Pope to rebuild an agency from scratch without additional resources or guidance from a commissioner and board members with the appropriate expertise. As Hochberg

notes, "We're asking an executive director and staff that is roughly the same size management-wise as the staff and executive director we had before to completely remake the agency, and that was not what the Legislature told the governor or the agency to do."

The TYC needs an outside management audit, perhaps commissioned by the Legislative Budget Board, to get its finances in order and prevent embarrassments such as the overtime overruns.

Instead of automatically drawing executives from within the state prison system, the governor should push a nationwide search for the best-qualified commissioner and permanent executive director. Every effort should be made to get an experienced and expert governing board in place as soon as possible.

State officials claimed to be caught by surprise by the TYC scandal last winter. If the delays in reforming the agency lead to more problems, they will have no one to blame but themselves.

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