

VICTORIA ADVOCATE

TYC contractors faced closures outside Texas

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DALLAS (AP) - Private contractors used by the Texas Youth Commission to house juvenile inmates have lost numerous contracts and had facilities closed in other states following allegations of neglect and physical and sexual abuse, according to a newspaper investigation.

The findings indicate additional problems for the troubled TYC, which is already undergoing sweeping reforms in the wake of a sex scandal in its state-run youth prisons and a possible coverup by agency officials.

According to a report published Sunday in The Dallas Morning News, companies running private juvenile facilities in Texas have faced lawsuits in other states and had facilities closed after investigators uncovered mismanagement and abuse of juvenile inmates.

"They are a much under-examined problem in the TYC system," said Scott Medlock, an attorney for the Texas Civil Rights Project.

Among the findings uncovered by the newspaper:

- GEO Group Inc., which runs Texas' largest private juvenile prison in Coke County, had facilities closed in two other states because of inadequate care of inmates and abuse allegations. The company also faced a 2000 lawsuit brought by the U.S. Justice Department that was later settled.
- Associated Marine Institutes, which runs facilities in San Antonio and Los Fresnos, had an Arkansas contract canceled. Former employees had testified that juveniles in the nonprofit's youth camps were sometimes shackled, left naked on the ground in sleeping bags and given a plastic bucket to use as a toilet.
- Cornerstone Programs Corp., which manages a private juvenile prison in West Texas, closed one of its Montana facilities after state officials there cited the company for violations including neglect and failure to report child abuse.

About 450 juveniles inmates in Texas are housed by 13 private operators. The TYC spent \$17 million last year doing business with private contractors.

Agency officials told the newspaper they were reviewing policies on contractors but could not comment about changes under consideration.

Contractors defended their operations.

AMI Executive Director Lisa Williams said her nonprofit has served more than 80,000 kids in nearly 40 years with "very few serious incidents." She called AMI's safety record "stellar."

Florida-based GEO, in written answers to the newspaper, wrote, "GEO is the seventh largest correctional system in the United States. Prisons are difficult environments on the best of days." The company went on to say it was "proud of its track record."

Cornerstone chief executive Joseph Newman said the company's Montana facility closed after the bad press from abuse cases filed against two high-ranking officials. He said the company was later cleared of abuse charges, but Montana officials said the state had no such records.

State laws generally prevent the TYC from accepting bids from contractors with troubled records, such as recently terminated contracts. But critics accuse the agency of letting contractors provide less background information than what should be required.

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