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Texas Youth Commission investigates leaks

Inquiry focuses on who gave information about errors on releasing inmates.

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Officials at the Texas Youth Commission, who earlier promised a new era of transparency at the troubled agency, have undertaken an investigation into who is leaking information to the public and to state legislators.

Two sources familiar with the inquiry said it was prompted by a July 13 article in the American-Statesman disclosing that Youth Commission officials had canceled the release of more than 150 teenage offenders after discovering that many had served little time on their sentences for serious violent crimes such as murder, aggravated sexual assault, aggravated robbery and kidnapping.

The sources familiar with the inquiry asked not to be quoted by name because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

House Corrections Committee Chairman Jerry Madden, a Richardson Republican who is co-chairman of a special legislative committee overseeing the Youth Commission overhaul, said he was not happy about the investigation.

"They should have better things to spend their time on," Madden said in a phone interview from a legislative conference in Boston. "They should be worried about fixing the problems out there, not about who's giving the Legislature information. ... It's important for people to continue coming forward with information about problems, so those problems can be corrected."

The agency exploded in scandal six months ago amid reports that top officials had failed to stop reported sexual abuse of incarcerated youths and engaged in a cover-up. Amid investigations and a management shake-up, lawmakers overhauled laws governing the commission with instructions to be more open in curbing past problems.

Operational glitches have continued to make headlines.

The July 13 Statesman story disclosed that within hours after Youth Commission officials announced an immediate review of the agency's release policies, officials with the state's adult parole system received a new list of about 70 youths who had been approved for parole, many of whom were on the earlier list of releases that were canceled. Faced with criticism from legislative leaders, commission officials subsequently withdrew that list.

Youth Commission Conservator Ed Owens and Acting Executive Director Dimitria Pope were out of the office Wednesday and not available for comment, an agency receptionist said. Bruce Toney, the Youth Commission's inspector general, said he could not comment on any investigations.

"It's an administrative investigation into whether anyone at TYC has been releasing confidential youth information to the public. That's all I can say," said Jim Hurley, the agency's public affairs director, who gave a statement to investigators as part of the inquiry. "It's a pretty low-level thing, I think. If someone has been releasing information that can't be released, I think you can see where that's a problem."

Sandy Pickell, a parole division employee of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, confirmed Wednesday that she was quizzed about whether she had talked with or given information to the Statesman or to a special legislative committee that has been looking into continuing management problems at the Youth Commission.

Pickell said she was told that investigators were "checking phone records."

Michelle Lyons, spokeswoman for the criminal justice agency, confirmed that an investigator from the prison agency accompanied a Youth Commission investigator who interviewed Pickell on Tuesday. "But we are not involved in this investigation. It is their investigation," Lyons said.

Pickell, who was responsible for screening the cases that were to be transferred from the Youth Commission to adult parole officials for supervision, on Wednesday characterized the interview as "an attempt to keep me from doing my job. ... They were concerned about how you and the Legislature was getting information."

"It felt like an attempt to intimidate me," she said.

Last spring, Pickell worked for a time for the special legislative committee.

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