

# The Dallas Morning News

## Youth prisons need expert leaders, not refugees

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Opinion Editorial

One size never will fit all for our prison systems. Adults are sent down one road, youths another, and not by accident.

More juvenile offenders – in Texas, that means those 10 to 17 years old when they commit crimes – have a chance after incarceration to straighten themselves out and become contributors to, rather than parasites on, society.

For that to happen, of course, the Texas Youth Commission needs leadership that understands the difference between adult and juvenile offenders. Troublingly, state officials up to Gov. Rick Perry appear stuck in the past.

This newspaper has reported in exhaustive detail about the physical and sexual abuse of inmates, official cover-ups and simple mismanagement in the TYC, a particularly distressing chapter in corrections in a state that could fill a library with such stories.

Tentative steps toward reform followed, but now we learn that at least 10 former officials from the adult prison system – no less troubled itself – have moved to TYC, including former second-in-command Ed Owens, who today sits atop the TYC organizational chart as conservator.

As investigative reporter Steve McGonigle documents in painful detail on today's front page, Mr. Owens either knew or should have known that one of his managers in the adult system, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, was a "sexual tyrant" who terrorized female subordinates for years.

Sammy Buentello harassed and molested so many women at TDCJ that investigators didn't even contact them all. At least a dozen of them gave statements. His favorite targets were vulnerable single mothers, who feared not only for their safety but for their jobs if they spoke up.

Those who did said later that they were ignored by the TDCJ equal employment opportunity office, over which Mr. Owens assumed oversight as deputy executive director in 2002. It's possible he's telling the truth that he had no idea until April 2004 about the allegations against Mr. Buentello, someone Mr. Owens had supervised and singled out for recognition to other officials in past years.

For Texas youths trapped in a dysfunctional correctional system, the question is much broader than one ill-fit administrator. Mr. Perry should insist that TYC officials take more seriously a blue-ribbon panel, which recommends a dramatic transformation built around experts in juvenile justice, not refugees from the adult prison system.

Different systems. Different goals.

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