

THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS

TYC officials say it's too soon to give up on agency

12:00 AM CST on Tuesday, December 16, 2008

By EMILY RAMSHAW / The Dallas Morning News
eramshaw@dallasnews.com

AUSTIN – Two years after a sexual abuse scandal tore through the Texas Youth Commission, state officials are yet again sparring over the agency's future.

This time, they're questioning whether the state's youth lock-up system – which has seen a legislative overhaul, a revolving door of executives and a costly restructuring since early 2007 – is even worth saving.

Proponents of the proposal to close the TYC and fold its operations into Texas' juvenile probation system say they've given the current agency plenty of time to work out its kinks, but it continues to stumble.

"We have one broken system that's wasteful in spending, that's top-heavy, and that houses juveniles in remote locations, far from home.

"And then we have juvenile probation, which seems to work," said Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, who chairs the Senate Criminal Justice Committee. "It's so apparent to me that we need to try something completely different."

The debate over whether to merge the two agencies is fundamentally about whether the TYC has served its purpose. With just 2,200 youth offenders, the TYC now oversees just a tiny fraction of Texas' juvenile criminals in its large, remote prisons. The question facing state leaders is whether it's more cost-effective for Texas and better for the state's juvenile offenders to serve them all at the local level – which the juvenile probation department already does.

'More time'

The idea has pushed TYC executives and the juvenile justice experts so often critical of them, all of whom believe the agency shouldn't be written off yet, into an unlikely alliance.

On Monday, juvenile justice advocates and TYC officials faced off against a state advisory panel that has recommended combining the youth prison system and juvenile probation into a single state agency, a harbinger of a debate that could reach the Legislature early next year.

"There's a lot of concern that, with another major reorganization, the needs of kids and their families will really be lost in the shuffle," said Isela Gutierrez, juvenile justice coordinator for the nonprofit Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. "It's too early to point to the concept of a merger and wave a victory flag."

Mr. Whitmire said that the proposal drew attention over the summer, from the governor's office, local judges and even juvenile justice advocates. But many lawmakers now say it's not the appropriate time to rock this boat.

"The TYC needs more time to develop," said Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen. "I think we're headed in the right direction. I'm not convinced a merger is the right way to go."

Since the sex abuse scandal broke in early 2007, the TYC has had a tumultuous ride. The agency has had a revolving door of senior officials, including three governor-appointed conservators and four executive directors. It has faced a laundry list of legislative mandates. And its finances have fallen under close scrutiny.

One executive director signed off on spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on renovating and relocating offices – money meant to hire new corrections officers. Another spent more than \$1 million over three months on an empty juvenile prison, drawing even more embarrassment.

At the same time, the agency has made big strides in complying with last session's sweeping reform bill – including installing new security cameras, improving staff-to-offender ratios and upping employee training.

New agency

Under the consolidation proposal, first aired by Mr. Whitmire, and developed in a recent report by Texas' Sunset Commission, the TYC would be dissolved and merged with Texas' Juvenile Probation Commission into a new agency, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department.

It would keep more youth offenders closer to home, Mr. Whitmire said, in community-based programs similar to those used by county probation services. And the state would save an estimated \$27 million annually by cutting staff and closing three youth lock-ups, including the one where the sexual abuse scandal was first identified.

It's a system similar to the one used in Missouri, he said, which advocates consider the gold-standard juvenile justice system in the country.

Keeping young offenders in small, de-institutionalized settings is something juvenile justice advocates have long favored and have pushed for in Texas. But they say – and TYC officials agree – that the state's latest round of upgrades hasn't had time to work.

And they argue this proposed merger won't get Texas closer to the Missouri model, which emphasizes showering youth offenders with love and affection, and housing them in group home dorms on school-like campuses.

"We're talking about places that kids are treated like kids, not just setting up mini jails in urban settings," Ms. Gutierrez said.

Meanwhile, TYC executives say the Sunset Commission's report on the agency is outdated and doesn't properly account for the strides they have made.

"To consolidate the functions ... really diverts our focus and attention from these significant reforms," TYC executive director Cheri Townsend said.

And juvenile probation officials, who already oversee 95 percent of Texas youths who get in trouble with the law, argue their effective system shouldn't be deconstructed to fix a struggling agency.

"The failures of the TYC are of the previous management of the agency," said Vicki Spriggs, executive director of the state juvenile probation commission. "We need a TYC. And it needs to be separate from the juvenile probation commission."

Read on Dallasnews.com:

http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/texasouthwest/legislature/stories/DN-tyc_16tex.ART.State.Edition2.4a8d73e.html