

Texas Youth Commission
Response to the Independent Ombudsman
Second Quarter Report, FY 2011
April 7, 2011

The Texas Human Resources Code, Section 64.060, provides that the Office of Independent Ombudsman (OIO) shall accept comments from the Texas Youth Commission (TYC) for the OIO's quarterly reports. The Code also provides that TYC may not submit comments after the 30th day after the date of the report. TYC received the OIO Second Quarter Report on March 24, 2011. TYC's response is directed toward section *IV. Recommendations*. The OIO recommendations are reproduced in highlighted italics for convenience in reviewing TYC responses.

- *Recommendation: Consider alternative scheduling of MDT's to maximize parent participation.*

TYC RESPONSE: On March 31, 2011 the Superintendent of Education and Director of Youth Services jointly addressed facility administrators regarding the scheduling of multidisciplinary team (MDT) meetings in the evenings to maximize parent participation. Administrators were directed to review MDT schedules and provide increased opportunities for parent participation, including occasionally scheduling MDTs in the evening to accommodate parent participation. Typically cognitive life skills group and specialized treatment groups are conducted after school and during evening hours. Routinely arranging MDT schedules during those evening hours could negatively impact other areas of programming for all youth and those concerns must be balanced with the benefits of evening MDT schedules. Ongoing collaboration between all MDT members, including education staff, is also critical for adjusting MDT schedules. Case managers and family liaisons collaborate in contacting family members to increase MDT participation and report/document that attendance so that TYC can further examine attendance issues.

For the 2010-11 school year, the Education program adjusted schedules so that youth and teachers could participate in MDT meetings without disruption of the educational services, which has improved the overall participation of youth and teachers. Additional operational changes are anticipated no later than early May 2011.

- *Recommendation: Continue to look for ways to provide medium security housing without punishing the youth who are transitioning home.*

TYC RESPONSE: The agency continues to monitor youth for appropriate medium security placement, and those placements have increased. Also, based on its programmatic goals, TYC does not agree with OIO's perspective that youth who are transitioning home are punished when they must work with new youth on behavioral issues.

The OIO report notes that TYC halfway houses were traditionally used only to prepare youth for their return home. However, reentry monitoring and planning for post-reform youth populations in these facilities has resulted in changing objectives for the use of halfway houses as the mix of youth with a range of profile needs are eligible for such placements. Medium security placements at halfway houses and the average daily populations increased during the first half of FY 2011, with most halfway houses now at or just under capacity. Revisions to General Administrative Policies 85.21 and 85.45, planned for summer 2011, will have additional impacts on halfway house utilization by increasing the opportunities for youth to move into halfway houses at points along their treatment continuum.

For the first six months of FY 2011, 374 youth were placed into TYC halfway houses. Of those, 61 (16%) received initial placements at halfway houses from the intake assessment unit. The majority were placed at McFadden Youth Ranch, which received 85% of its assigned youth directly from the assessment unit consistent with longstanding practice. Schaeffer House and York House also received a high percentage of youth from intake due to their Alcohol and Other Drugs services, with 18% and 25%, respectively. The remaining halfway houses received from zero to two youth from intake during the period.

In CoNEXTions, youth are expected to increase their social responsibility and problem solving abilities. Opportunities to practice these skills by assisting other youth in thinking through problem situations is precisely the kind of activity that is useful in a step-down or any other setting. This practice need not interfere in other youth being involved in programming that is important to their own success (work, school, treatment groups). The Director of Youth Services addressed facility administrators regarding activity schedules and staffing on March 31, 2011.

The youth and staff frustration noted in the OIO report may be reflective of a program in transition from changing objectives for halfway house utilization. Rehabilitation services staff were assigned to each halfway house to assist in identifying staff training needs and working with case managers to ensure youth are receiving the individualized services CoNEXTions requires. Policy and procedures training for halfway house administrators is planned for the next Superintendents meeting. The halfway house task group for "Rethinking Halfway Houses" has conducted focus groups with youth, staff, and parents to generate ideas for improved utilization. Findings will be presented to the operations management team. The Research Department is also providing statistical reports to analyze how youth move through halfway houses.

Additionally, halfway house administrators are expected to take an increased leadership role in preparation, coaching and mentoring their staff to work effectively with youth along the treatment continuum. An example of emerging success is the training plan developed and implemented with the York House Superintendent, including youth accountability training, CoNEXTions services, and follow-up site visits. Schaeffer House has received training specific to working with youth with mental health issues and on-site coaching by the Deputy Director of Youth Services for Facility Operations regarding youth accountability systems (check-ins). All halfway houses are scheduled to receive mental health training in the coming months.

- **Recommendation:** *Continue training on CoNEXTions.*

TYC RESPONSE: TYC agrees with the recommendation and is continuing CoNEXTions training. As TYC stated in response to the first quarter report, CoNEXTions continues to mature and TYC continues to enhance implementation and develop staff skills in the various components. Several activities are underway and those mentioned in the earlier response are not reiterated here. Additional activities:

- Continued opportunities for classroom training on the various components offered through the staff development department.
- The central office Rehabilitation and Treatment department staff held a training workshop for rehabilitation program specialists in late January to discuss CoNEXTions oversight and collaboration on action plans to increase fidelity in implementation of CoNEXTions. Each secure facility has developed a plan for improvement in identified areas, and central office staff members are partnered with facilities to implement those plans.
- CoNEXTions video conferences are held on every third Wednesday to provide opportunities to foster a shared perspective of the program as a comprehensive

rehabilitative strategy. Topics have been Re-Entry (February), Trauma-Informed care (March), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (scheduled for April 20th).

These specific activities are important because the bigger picture is that one of the agency's most significant reform challenges has been to achieve an effective permanent balance between rehabilitation and correctional philosophies. These activities are efforts along that path.

***Recommendation:** Take a more aggressive approach to training in gang activity identification and deterrence.*

TYC RESPONSE: TYC is taking a more aggressive approach. The first quarter OIO report raised general concerns about safety and specific concerns about bullying and gang-related issues. TYC's response for the first quarter included information regarding collection of PBIS data on bullying, the Evins pilot of a gang peace treaty, and the GITRedy grant program for Harris County gang youth. Additionally, at the beginning of the fiscal year TYC implemented a new program curriculum that specifically focuses on reducing gang involvement. Since our response to the last OIO report, the following additional initiatives have taken place or are planned for implementation:

- Provided training to additional staff in Aggression Replacement Training[®] (ART) which has allowed the agency to increase the number of ART groups provided and the number of youth who can participate in this evidence-based program.
- Held training on Santa Muerte, a specific gang subculture impacting youth in South Texas.
- Scheduled training for dorm supervisors and operations administrators on April 18-19th, which will address youth accountability and gang identification and tracking. These supervisors will be expected to take the learning back to their facilities and provide a leadership role in addressing safety issues. Field staff will also have an opportunity to identify areas for further training in these areas. OIO staff will be invited to attend this training at Navarro College.
- Roll out of policy revisions and standard to address youth who commit aggressive acts resulting in serious bodily injury of youth or staff on July 1, 2011. There is a training plan for extensive local training prior to roll out.
- Continued use of assessment and safe housing tools to identify aggressive and vulnerable youth. Partnerships with central office treatment staff and facility rehabilitation supervisors to increase case manager understanding and confidence for ensuring that case plan goals and action steps target the real needs of youth, especially those who appear behaviorally well-adjusted but maintain anti-social attitudes, values and beliefs. Such youth are often campus gang leaders. This is a specific area of focus since 52% of youth are committed to TYC for violent offenses and 44% admit at intake that they are gang members.
- Use of youth/staff safety committee at Evins and a gang task force at Gainesville to address local gang issues and ensure that issues are addressed before they escalate.

Recommendation: *Retrain staff on policy and procedures regarding the completion of release packets. Implement a time line for the packets to be moved from one area to the next and hold each division accountable for completeness and accuracy.*

TYC RESPONSE: Additional information from OIO on this item would be helpful. The recommendation appears to be based on second-hand reports of delays of up to 90 days; however, TYC's review found no indeterminate sentenced youth assigned to secure institutions 90 days beyond the assigned minimum length of stay (MLOS). The agency found 14 indeterminate sentence youth with assigned MLOS in February who were therefore in TYC secure facilities more than 30 days beyond the MLOS. All of these youth were verified for release or under review by the Release Review Panel: 9 had release dates for early April; 3 had packets pending (requiring revisions); and 2 are pending decision by the Release Review Panel. TYC will continue to track youth to ensure timely releases.

The Youth Services Division and Release Review Panel staffs have continued to enhance their partnership to improve the timely completion of packets for youth release or extension. As part of the agency's ongoing quality improvement efforts training is repeated for reinforcement of best practices.