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### Final decision to shut down PBSO Eagle Academy comes Tuesday at County Commission meeting

By Jerome Burdi, Sun Sentinel

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BELLE GLADE

Juliana Escobar slipped into the darker side of her teenage years. She was failing in school, experimenting with drugs and sex. Conversations with her mother fell into screaming matches.

"My mother said, 'I don't want to give up on you,' said Escobar, 15, of [Wellington](#). Instead, she was sent to the Eagle Academy.

The military-style Eagle Academy for troubled teens was developed by the [Palm Beach County](#) Sheriff's Office 13 years ago as a way to teach adolescents discipline, respect and better study habits before they give in to temptations and end up in jail.

The program is voluntary. Students must write an essay on why they wanted to attend, and are selected based on their desire, provided they have no violent criminal background, academy commander Lt. Robert Quinones said.

After graduation, students are tracked for 120 days, Quinones said, looking at their progression both academically and behaviorally. The school has an 86 percent success rate, he said.

But it is to be shut down in December as the Sheriff's Office cuts \$25 million from its budget, as mandated by the County Commission.

Final vote on the county budget is Tuesday.

"If it wasn't for the program, my daughter would be doing drugs or pregnant at this time," Escobar's mother, Vivian Gomez, said. "It's helped, giving me a lot of tools to resolve problems, and has helped me with my other kids, too."

Students who have gone through the rigors of the school say it's improved their lives and relationships with their families.

"If they close this place, it will eliminate any chance [Palm Beach County](#) has to help their youth to become leaders," said student Zachary Taft, 16, of Lake Worth.

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When Taft got to the school in August 2009, he had straight F's in school. Now, in his third semester, he has straight A's, good posture, shiny boots and looks his instructors in the eye: "Sir. Yes sir!" he shouts back in response to orders.

"I never thought my parents loved me. Now I know they do," said the teenager with a shaved head. "I never thought I could get all A's in my life."

Eagle Academy costs about \$4.5 million a year to run. By comparison, an average elementary school costs \$5 million a year, an average middle school costs \$7 million a year and an average high school costs \$14 million a year, school district officials said.

The academy — free except for a \$300 uniform fee — houses up to 100 boys and 20 girls, ages 13 to 16. Students sleep in barracks-like dorms under the watchful eye of deputies trained as drill instructors, and have to earn rights such as going home on weekends and making personal phone calls.

During school classes, a deputy sits in the back of the room, shouting at camouflage-clad students who may drift into an afternoon nap.

The 38,000-square-foot school is devoid of common distractions such as iPods, social networking websites and cell phones. Boys and girls are separated. Boys get buzz cuts and girls keep their hair in a bun.

The older students — many of whom choose to return for another semester after they could leave — are there to help set an example and keep the younger ones on track, especially when a drill instructor is barking orders and they wonder what they've gotten themselves into.

"They are here to help you," Taft said. "They yell at you, but you have to listen to what they say, not how [loud] they are saying it."

At first, some students try to just get by, even sneaking in contraband, such as cookies. But then, older students say, they realize this is a second chance and they want to excel in the program.

"I want to prove to myself and everyone else that I'm not a quitter," Escobar said, despite admitting that she enjoys weekends when she can sleep in and wear her hair down.

Though the teenagers are unruly when they arrive, the academy helps them morph into little soldiers.

"This program is about keeping them out of trouble and away from a detention facility," Quinones said. "Our goal is to save young lives."

Quinones points to New York Jets wide receiver David Clowney, an Eagle Academy alumnus. In an interview with ESPN, he credited Eagle Academy with helping him succeed. In March, he returned to talk with the students.

Still, boot-camp programs such as the Eagle Academy have good intentions but don't always succeed, said Jeanne Stinchcomb, Florida Atlantic University professor of criminology and criminal justice.

"These programs used to be called 'shock incarceration.' [They're] not divine intervention," Stinchcomb said. "You're not going to accomplish miracles."

But, she said, with the right follow-up from deputies and with student determination, change can come.

Sheriff Ric Bradshaw said cutting the program is one of the toughest decisions he's had to make, and he hopes it can be reopened, possibly as a charter school or in another form with outside funding. The Eagle Academy Foundation, a nonprofit group made up of alumni parents, is making such efforts.

"When you have to make the decision on having to take deputies off the street or drop programs that you're not mandated to do, there's only one decision you can make. I can't take deputies off the street," Bradshaw said. "I can remember looking in the face of some of the kids there, but I've also got to protect the public."

Bradshaw closed the successful Drug Farm jail drug-treatment program this month, in order to save \$4.7 million a year.

Besides Eagle Academy's military protocol — which starts at 4 a.m. with exercise and flag raising — students are matched with case managers who help them work through problems. Once a week, their parents are required to meet with case managers and a clinical psychologist to learn about better family relationships.

During a recent lunch, boys in camouflage marched into the chow hall followed by Deputy Commodore Bradford, a former military drill instructor in fatigues, barking song. The students repeated after him:

"I don't know but I been told, the Eagle Academy is mighty bold!"

They marched to their places, their boots stomping the concrete lunchroom floor.

The stern-eyed students hollered: "I like it here, I love it here, I finally found a home away from home."

*Staff Researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.*

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