

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Sat, Jan. 24, 2009

## Troubled Miami-Dade reform school may be forced to close main campus

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER

A Miami-Dade reform school for troubled teens, once considered a national model, could be forced to shut its 16-year-old main campus. State administrators have yanked the school's contract, citing escapes, allegations of abuse and neglect, and other chronic problems.

In a letter dated Jan. 7, the Department of Juvenile Justice's South Florida chief said Bay Point Schools in South Dade will lose state funding March 1, and that admissions to the 157-bed campus have been frozen. Youths already are being transferred to similar programs or being released.

Budget problems triggered the decision -- the department has to cut \$5 million this year and will save \$2 million by closing Bay Point's Kennedy campus -- but the school has been beset by critical lapses, said agency Assistant Secretary Darryl Olson.

"They have consistently failed to comply with DJJ standards," Olson said. "We haven't been getting the kind of return on investment we would like."

Added DJJ spokesman Frank Penela: "In the budget times we're in, we can't afford to do that anymore."

The announcement of Bay Point's funding loss is the final -- and most striking -- mile marker on a journey that took the program from national prominence to the brink of extinction.

Both Mary Louise Cole, the head of the school, and DJJ administrators agree the long-simmering dispute stems from a deep disagreement over the school's core mission.

"I treat them like students. I treat them with respect. They call them offenders and treat them like offenders," Cole said.

Said Olson: "Her vision of the program is not necessarily a program that would serve delinquent youth."

Bay Point managers insist the reform school remains a national model but has suffered under a hyper-vigilant state administration that has peppered the program with written complaints while failing to provide sufficient money to meet such exacting standards.

"Over the past 15 years, thousands of at-risk young men have turned their lives around and have flourished in universities, private businesses, trade schools, professional sports, government, the military . . ." the school said in a statement.

"Closing this program," officials added, "is an impulsive act that could create huge political embarrassment."

"They really built it from nothing into a beautiful campus," said retired Miami-Dade juvenile court Judge Tom Petersen. "They got a reputation as being the best -- and they have for years."

## **NOT ALL CUT OFF**

Bay Point had been receiving about \$5 million each year to run the Kennedy campus, which housed moderate-risk youth, some of whom received mental-health care or drug treatment. Two other Bay Point programs, housing a total of 52 youths, will retain their state funding.

For several years, Bay Point's programs have been a favorite among judges, children's advocates, some of the kids who were committed there, Gov. Charlie Crist -- who sent a video praising their efforts to a fundraiser last year -- and former Gov. Jeb Bush, who attended an opening ceremony.

"This is the best thing that's ever happened to me," one boy at the campus told a monitor in January 2007, according to school records.

Wrote former student Efrain Herrera Jr., in a letter to President Barack Obama: "To say that Bay Point Schools changed my life is an understatement. It changed my mother's life, my father's life, and everyone who has come into contact with me since I have attended." Herrera graduated the school with a 3.7 average, he wrote.

Roy Miller, a juvenile justice reform advocate who heads the Florida Children's Campaign, called the reform school's closing "a self-fulfilling prophecy. We had said three years ago, you will see good programs run into severe problems because of the completely unrealistic [funding] provided by DJJ," Miller said.

Regulatory records obtained by The Miami Herald show Bay Point has been plagued by a host of problems in recent years, including repeated incidents of medical neglect, a spate of escapes, inadequate staffing, gang-related graffiti and numerous allegations the program failed to pay its bills or make payroll.

Since 2003, DJJ administrators have recorded 98 significant incidents at the Cutler Bay campus, including 34 escapes involving 63 youths, and allegations of unnecessary force, abuse or neglect, improper supervision and falsification of records, said DJJ spokesman Penela.

## **STAFFING PROBLEMS**

Perhaps the most significant recurring complaint from DJJ administrators was that Bay Point lacked sufficient staff to secure the camp, which was cited for falling below minimum staffing requirements in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2008, Penela said.

A Jan. 11, 2008, report by DJJ monitors, for example, found one staffer supervising 30 kids during an escape some time earlier -- more than double the permitted staffing ratio. Later that month, monitors found two staffers supervising 28 boys -- also above the ratio required by contract, records show.

A May 2008 inspection noted five escapes since a review three months earlier, adding: "Law enforcement was not contacted timely for escapes." On Sept. 7, four days after DJJ monitors were on campus, another five detainees escaped, records show.

In January 2008, an inspector reported "considerable graffiti found on various locations within the

dormitories." The report added: "In the back lavatory . . . there were three separate etchings of graffiti that were gang specific . . . . The drawings defacing the state property were gang related." In 2005, investigators found that complaints the program failed to provide timely medical care were substantiated. Twice, in May and June 2008, DJJ investigators substantiated allegations that staff failed to take youths for emergency treatment quickly. The June investigation also confirmed allegations that ``youth [were] without prescribed medication for weeks."

The Kennedy campus also has been faulted for lack of cleanliness. A May 2008 report found ``bathrooms were dirty and candy wrappers were found in latrines. Insects were seen in bathrooms. Cracked tiles in weight room and kitchen. Ceiling tiles and cooler in kitchen were dirty . . . . Trash on grounds, spit balls on ceiling."

And during a January 2008 inspection, a DJJ monitor saw a former Bay Point detainee -- who also had spent two years at an adult prison -- in a staff uniform supervising DJJ youth. The man said he was a volunteer, records show.

"Under no circumstances should this individual be anywhere near this campus," a monitor wrote.

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