

## Southern Poverty Law Center

### SPLC Campaign Closes Notorious Mississippi Girls' Prison

The state of Mississippi has decided to close the state's notorious Columbia Training School, seven months after the Southern Poverty Law Center sued the state to stop the physical and sexual abuse of teenage girls confined there.

The SPLC suit exposed brutal conditions at the prison, including the painful shackling of girls for weeks at a time. It also sought to force the state to provide mental health and rehabilitative services to girls, many of whom suffer from emotional problems or mental illness.

In announcing the decision today, the state's Department of Human Services (DHS) said Gov. Haley Barbour and the DHS recognized the need to provide the best possible care and supervision of juveniles placed in state custody and the need to use taxpayer funds efficiently. The DHS also said the state seeks to decrease incarceration of juveniles and provide quality services for at-risk youth.

"We applaud the governor's wisdom in making this decision," said Bear Atwood, director of the SPLC's Mississippi Youth Justice Project. "It takes courage and foresight to change the status quo. We are heartened that Mississippi is realizing that harsh punishment for juveniles who commit minor offenses is not only ineffective but counterproductive."

The DHS said it will transfer the 37 girls at Columbia to Oakley Training School, the state's prison for boys, within the next 90 days. The legislature will be asked to permanently close Columbia.

"Most of the girls at Columbia do not belong in prison at all," Atwood said. "Most are there for very minor, nonviolent offenses. Ripping them from their families and locking them up only encourages further delinquency."

Most of the girls at Columbia could be treated far more effectively — at half the cost — in community-based programs that focus on rehabilitation and mental health treatment. In 2007, according to the state, it cost \$5.8 million to house an average population of 47 girls. The facility has 109 staffers.

**Stay informed.** Keep up to date on this story and others by [subscribing to the SPLC e-newsletter](#).