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Groups say abuse remains in Texas juvenile prisons

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AUSTIN, Texas — Four juvenile inmate advocacy groups have alleged that widespread abuse continues in the Texas juvenile prison system, almost four years after a sex abuse and cover-up scandal forced sweeping reforms.

The groups submitted a formal complaint asking the U.S. Justice Department to investigate conditions in the Texas Youth Commission, the Austin American-Statesman reported in its online edition Tuesday.

The complaint filed by Texas Appleseed, Advocacy Inc., the Center for Public Representation and the National Center for Youth Law accused the commission of failing to protect the 1,700 juvenile inmates in its system because of short staffing and the use of improper restraints and excessive force.

A commission statement issued Tuesday said it has worked with two of the groups for three years to address the issues "and will

work to fully investigate any allegations" in the complaint.

According to the newspaper, the complaint also alleged that juveniles are not provided adequate medical and mental health care and educational programs. Also, it contends the number of youth-on-youth assaults in commission facilities in Beaumont and Corsicana remain high. Those centers had the second-highest rate of sexual assault among the nation's juvenile prisons last year, according to a federal report.

"Our recent visits to facilities indicate broader systemic problems that TYC leadership has not resolved. These problems are not isolated to specific sites, but exist throughout TYC's system of lockdown facilities," the complaint stated.

A commission statement said its officials regard the safety of inmates and staff members as "a top priority." The statement also cited improvements the commission has made in reducing youth assaults, imposing zero tolerance of mistreatment or abuse, and providing school programs and medical and mental health care.

Nevertheless, the complaint to the Justice Department alleged that several conditions that led to mass resignations and retirements of commission officials in 2007 remain.

Justice Department spokesmen told the newspaper that the agency was reviewing the complaint.

Meanwhile, Gov. Rick Perry's office issued a statement that insisted Texas can fix any problems without federal intervention, even as legislative leaders whose investigations led to the sweeping reforms of 2007 demanded answers.

"When we have allegations like this that we can't ensure the safety of the youths in our facilities, we're back to where we were three or four years ago," said state Rep. Jim McReynolds, chairman of the House Corrections Committee and a member of the special legislative panel that investigated the commission in 2007. "I don't want to

hear that we're making strides. If what we're doing is not what needs to be done to stop this, then it's time for some changes."

State Sen. John Whitmire, chairman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee and co-chairman of the 2007 special commission investigative panel, called on state leaders to act immediately to ensure the safety of juvenile inmates.

"It appears we have some dangerous facilities ... that some problems remain," he told the American-Statesman.

Information from: Austin American-Statesman, <http://www.statesman.com>

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