

ACLU sues Texas youth prison system claiming abuse

By Jim Vertuno, Associated Press, June 11, 2008

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — The American Civil Liberties Union sued the Texas youth prison system on Thursday, claiming girl inmates have been traumatized by practices such as solitary confinement and strip searches.

The lawsuit filed in Austin on behalf of five girls held at the Brownwood facility claims the Texas Youth Commission is violating inmates' constitutional rights and international standards on protecting children from abuse and cruel treatment.

"It's in the interests of both the children and TYC to stop these practices," said Lenora Lapidus, director of the ACLU's women's rights project.

TYC spokesman Jim Hurley said officials would discuss the issues with the ACLU in an attempt to resolve any dispute.

Brownwood is the only TYC facility for girls and it holds inmates on violations ranging from property offenses to serious crimes. Its estimated population was more than 19,700 in 2006, latest figures available.

According to the lawsuit, girls at Brownwood have been regularly placed in solitary confinement as punishment for days, weeks or months. Strip searches were conducted even when the girls had not left the Brownwood facility, and guards used force, such as pepper spray, handcuffs and leather straps, when they resisted, the lawsuit said.

The five inmates have histories of sexual physical or emotional abuse. The types of treatment alleged in the

lawsuit can trigger flashbacks to childhood rapes and feeling degraded and humiliated, the ACLU contends.

"The link between psychological trauma and delinquent behavior is well established," said Lisa Graybill, executive director of the ACLU of Texas. "Instead of helping girls learn to cope with their experiences, TYC is retraumatizing them through the use of solitary confinement and strip searches."

Hurley, who had not seen the lawsuit and could not discuss specific allegations, said the agency is taking steps to improve how it deals with female inmates. He noted the agency recently ended a long-term isolation program that had been used at a different facility.

"Reforms are taking place," Hurley said. "We're revamping the way behavioral and aggression issues are addressed."

TYC officials created a Girls Task Force to identify specific needs of female inmates, including classroom issues and health and psychological care.

"We are working hard to provide an environment that is suited to the unique needs of our females," TYC Conservator Richard Nedelkoff said in a prepared statement that declined to address the specific issues raised in the lawsuit.

The ACLU has been a harsh critic of Texas' juvenile corrections system struggling to overcome revelations of inmate abuse and possible cover-ups that came to light in early 2007. State lawmakers ordered a massive overhaul of the agency and several top administrators were either fired or resigned.

The ACLU and other groups then zeroed in on TYC policies for the use of solitary confinement, pepper spray and other techniques for restraining unruly inmates.

Will Harrell, former director of the ACLU of Texas, was one of the agency's toughest critics and now works as TYC's independent watchdog. He criticized the ACLU's lawsuit and said most of the allegations raised are being addressed by Nedelkoff and other officials.

Many other inmate advocates are meeting with TYC to address problems, Harrell said.

"I wish ACLU had come to me with their concerns. I would have worked with them to resolve it," Harrell said.

Return to:
[Abuse in "boot camps"](#)
[The Newsroom](#)
[Front Page](#)

HAVE YOU BEEN TO THE NEWSROOM? CLICK HERE!
