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Florida empties boot camp where teen was beaten by guards

Death of 14-year-old juvenile offender is still under investigation

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – All juvenile offenders have been removed from a Panama City boot camp where a 14-year-old boy was hit and kicked by guards before he died, the head of the state's juvenile justice agency said Wednesday.

Under sometimes hostile questioning, Department of Juvenile Justice Secretary Anthony Schembri told the state House Juvenile Justice Committee that the camp was emptied Tuesday. It was run and staffed by the Bay County sheriff's office under contract with the department.

Bay County Sheriff Frank McKeithen has said he planned to shut down the camp in May because of 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson's death, which is under investigation. A medical examiner said he died from complications of a genetic blood disorder, which the family disputes.

Agency officials said that 22 children were there at the beginning of the week but that 12 graduated Tuesday and the remaining 10 were transferred to other facilities. Mr. Schembri didn't say whether they went to other boot camps or other types of department-run programs.

Mr. Schembri said the children who had remained in the camp were moved as soon as beds could be found for them elsewhere in the system. There are four other state-supervised boot camps in Florida.

Although he ordered children moved out of the Bay County facility, Mr. Schembri defended using military-style boot camps.

"For some kids, this works," Mr. Schembri said.

He also said that some changes were coming in the way the agency deals with contractors who care for the kids the department sends them, such as sheriff's agencies that run boot camps, although he said he couldn't yet give specifics.

Some members of the panel grilled him about the agency's role in protecting children in its custody and what it can do when a contractor violates department policy.

Mr. Schembri said the agency monitors compliance with its standards and can close down boot camps if they are particularly bad. But, he said, the agency prefers to work with contractors to try to improve them first.

Mr. Schembri tried to reassure the panel that the agency was considering changes.

"We're talking to the sheriffs about policies and procedures ... that they could employ," Mr. Schembri said. "We're doing anything we can to make sure another tragedy like that doesn't happen."

Mr. Schembri also met Wednesday with Gov. Jeb Bush and sheriffs in the four other counties that have boot camps: Pinellas, Manatee, Martin and Polk.

"We invited the sheriffs to discuss ways to improve rules and procedures," Bush spokeswoman Alia Faraj said. She said they didn't get too deeply into specific changes but agreed to continue to meet.

Martin died Jan. 6 at a Pensacola hospital, hours after he collapsed after doing exercises on his first day at the camp. He was then beaten by guards during a half-hour assault recorded on video.

The Bay County medical examiner ruled that Martin died because of complications from the blood disorder sickle cell trait, not from being beaten. A second autopsy is planned for next week. A special prosecutor in Tampa is also investigating, but no criminal charges have been filed.