

## Committee looks into sex abuse claims at youth prison

By **LISA SANDBERG** Copyright 2007 Houston Chronicle  
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AUSTIN — Allegations that troubled youths at a West Texas juvenile prison were sexually preyed on by staff members despite repeated warnings to supervisors are "the tip of the iceberg" in a system where "wrongdoing is becoming the norm," a state senator said Monday.

Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, said his office has received 90 allegations of Texas Youth Commission staff members sexually assaulting juvenile offenders since 2000, with only a few instances of disciplinary action taken.

"This is a problem all over the state," said Hinojosa, vice chairman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, which today will hear testimony on the sex abuse allegations in the state-run facilities.

On Friday, the commission's executive director abruptly resigned, citing the abuse allegations. Dwight Harris had been scheduled to testify at today's hearing; now, he is under no obligation to do so, said Hinojosa.

Lawmakers will be asking some tough questions of his temporary replacement, Neil Nichols, the

commission's general counsel who oversaw the agency's investigating division when some of the worst allegations of sexual abuse were reported.

Some of the most troubling sex abuse allegations center on the West Texas State School, a 250-bed facility for troubled males between 11 and 21 in the rural community of Pyote. Two former administrators have been accused in an internal report of sexually abusing the youths. No charges have been filed, but an investigation is under way.

Hinojosa said he had reports of sexual abuse occurring at many of the 13 secure facilities around the state, including a 15-year-old girl at a facility in Brownwood who had a sexual relationship with one of the counselors.

One of Hinojosa's bills, Senate Bill 103, would require the commission to provide 300 hours of training to newly hired guards, increase staffing to at least one guard for every 12 youths, from the current one in 15 during the day and 1 in 24 at night, and prohibit the current practice of housing youths as young as 11 in unsupervised dorm rooms with those as old as 19.

[lsandberg@express-news.net](mailto:lsandberg@express-news.net)

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