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### **Md. official would like to 'blow up' girls' detention center**

#### **Laurel facility called 'atrocious' but improvements noted**

By Christopher M. Matthews

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LAUREL —

As you approach Thomas J.S. Waxter Children's Center, a sign cautions that you are under camera surveillance. Notices warn against bringing in contraband - glass bottles, cigarettes, weapons.

A metal detector sits in the front hall. You pass through a locked metal door to reach the residential wings.

Down the hallway, the staff supervision room is separated from the children by a thick metal cage.

On a Wednesday in September, a girl stands shackled in the hall, the cuffs around her hands and ankles connected by a metal chain.



This is Waxter, the only long-term, secure treatment facility for female juvenile offenders run by the state.

"Nothing's worse than Waxter, dead serious, nothing's worse," said Britney McCoy, 19, who has been in and out of Waxter and other facilities since she was 12. She was most recently in Waxter in 2008.

McCoy is not Waxter's only critic. The Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit of the attorney general's office has noted a litany of problems at Waxter, including: allegations by girls that they are physically abused by staff members; mingling of girls convicted of serious crimes with girls held for minor offenses; inadequate physical facilities; and overcrowding and understaffing, which lead to violence.

"No one should have to live there. No one should have to work there," said Claudia Wright, who monitors the facility for the Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit.

Officials with the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland, Advocates for Children and Youth and the public defender's office also say it should be closed.

Even the secretary of the Department of Juvenile Services, which runs the state's juvenile justice system, concedes that Waxter should be replaced. "I'd like to blow it up," Secretary Donald DeVore said in an interview.

But DeVore and the department defend the progress they've made, saying Waxter is a better place today than it was before. They also deny many of the allegations made by the attorney general's monitoring unit.

Waxter sits on 12 acres behind a condominium complex in Laurel. It was built in 1963 as a detention center for boys and girls, but was converted into a girls-only facility in 1999. It can hold up to 46 girls, ranging from 12 to 18 years old.

The A Unit houses girls who have been sentenced by a court and "committed" to Waxter for serious crimes. The B Unit is populated by girls who are pre-adjudication or "detained" for less serious offenses, such as truancy. The C Unit houses girls who have been through the court system but are pending long-term placement.

Waxter is the only facility in Maryland that houses both committed and detained populations. Girls are placed there from every county in the state.

DeVore and his colleagues believe they are making the best of a bad situation.

"Even though the plant is atrocious physically, and we recognize that, and we've done what we can, kind of, cosmetically, the atmosphere ... has tremendously improved," said Tammy Brown, DeVore's chief of staff.

Some of Waxter's halls are painted pink and violet. A few of the committed girls have decorated their cells with stuffed animals and large cut-out letters spelling their names.

In November, the attorney general's monitoring unit released a quarterly facility report that related eight allegations made by girls of physical abuse at the hands of staff. Four of the allegations were made against one staff member who has since been transferred to another facility.

The monitoring unit's Wright confirmed that there were problems with the quality of Waxter's staff. But she said the facility's new superintendent, Johnitha McNair, is working hard to get rid of the "bad" staff.

Brown said there are requirements under state law that prohibit serious offenders from becoming state employees and that all state employees are fingerprinted and undergo background checks. She said the department installed its own checks for staff members.

In 2007, the monitors released a report calling for Waxter's closure. Among other things, the report criticized the center for its lack of a female-specific treatment model, pointed to faulty door locks as a potential fire hazard, and criticized the physical state of the facility.

Juvenile Services has installed a new locking system, renovated the bathrooms and hired a consultant to help them implement rehabilitation programs designed for girls.

But the monitors put out a report in July criticizing Waxter for other problems, such as being continually understaffed and overcrowded. The report also said Waxter was violating state law by allowing detained and committed populations to mix. Because of the physical layout, detained girls

unavoidably pass through the committed wing on a regular basis.

The monitoring unit's November quarterly report criticized Waxter for housing mentally ill girls at the facility, an allegation confirmed by Deborah St. Jean, director of the attorney general's Juvenile Protection Division.

Maryland Newslne's Kelly Brooks contributed to this article.

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