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Offenders referred to Pa. school

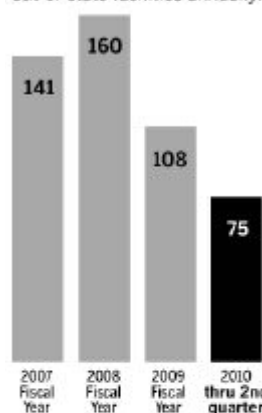
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By Lynn Arditì

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Out of state placements

Number of juveniles placed in out-of-state facilities annually.



Annual cost of placing juveniles in out-of-state facilities. (in millions)



SOURCE: DCYF
THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL
TOM MURPHY

Deep in rural Pennsylvania, some 300 miles from Providence, The Glen Mills Schools appears to offer much to troubled teenaged boys. The school's glossy brochure depicts a lush, green campus with neat athletic fields, a football stadium and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Vocational programs range from auto body repair and landscaping to dentistry and golf course management.

Glen Mills has so impressed Chief Family Court Judge Jeremiah S. Jeremiah Jr. that he recently referred a dozen delinquent boys there.

But state child welfare officials say no matter how good the school may be, troubled teens generally do better when they stay close to their families and communities. More than a decade ago, officials at the

state Department of Children, Youth and Families concluded that juveniles with behavioral or emotional problems could be helped more cheaply, and with better results, closer to home.

Now, state child welfare officials and the Family Court's highest judge are at odds over how best to treat juvenile delinquents in state care.

"If there's nothing in the state, fine, we look outside of Rhode Island," Patricia Martinez, director of the state Department of Children, Youth and Families, said. "The question is: What is [the child] going to get out of state that he's not going to get in Rhode Island?"

Glen Mills has been recruiting juvenile offenders from Rhode Island at least since the late 1990s, when Jeremiah and then-director of the DCYF, Jay G. Lindgren Jr., climbed into a borrowed Department of Corrections van and drove 300 miles to visit the school.

"They toured us around, spent a lot of time talking with us," Lindgren recalled. "It all looked very good."

Back then, the courtship produced only a handful of enrollments for the school. The distance was a big reason, Lindgren said. Glen Mills is so remote, he said, it was hard for teenagers to maintain family and community ties. And keeping in touch with youths so far away is time consuming and expensive.

"Too often," Lindgren said, "the kids were kind of out of sight, out of mind."

Then, in late January of this year, Jeremiah suggested that Andrew J. Johnson, a lawyer and director of the Rhode Island Court Appointed Special Advocate's office, visit Glen Mills to see what their program has to offer. Johnson flew to Philadelphia, at the school's expense, where a school van drove him the 22 miles to the school in Concordville, Pa. He met with admissions officials, toured the campus and talked to students.

"It's a remarkable place," Johnson said after he returned. "Step on the campus and it's like a prep school or a university"

Glen Mills houses up to 900 juvenile offenders, ages 14 to 18. The school does not admit fire setters, sex offenders or children who take psychotropic medication for behavioral or mental health problems. (The school is not licensed to provide mental health services.) Students live in unlocked, dormitory-style housing and move freely around the campus; behavior is managed through a system of "peer pressure" and "group confrontation," a promotional booklet states.

Graduates with good grades can qualify for college scholarships of up to \$3,000 per semester.

It costs Rhode Island about \$134 per day to send one teenager to Glen Mills. (Last year, it sent seven.) That's substantially less than the roughly \$370 per diem cost of operating the state training school, a high-security facility with mandated staffing levels. It's also about \$20 to \$80 per day less than three of the four residential programs — all of which are staffed with licensed mental health counselors — for delinquent boys in Rhode Island.

The DCYF also normally does not pay travel expenses for parents to visit their children in out-of-state facilities. But last year, Jeremiah ordered the DCYF to reimburse four family members who couldn't afford the travel expense; the air fare cost the state just under \$1,700.

Glen Mills will cover families' travel expenses for an additional per diem cost of \$20, though state officials here have not agreed to the higher rate.

The DCYF is required to visit juveniles placed out of state "at least once per month, or more frequently as needed" to ensure their safety and well-being. But since last December, neither DCYF staff nor anyone from the agency's private contractor, which visits youths in out-of-state programs, has been monitoring the teenagers at Glen Mills.

"Obviously we should be doing this," Jorge E. Garcia, the DCYF's deputy director, said. However, he said, the policy covers only treatment facilities, not schools. And he acknowledged visits "will be another cost..."

In Rhode Island, as in other states, child welfare agencies have been trying to reduce their reliance on residential programs.

A 2003 report commissioned by former Gov. Lincoln Almond said that Rhode Island had become dependent on "expensive out-of-state" residential treatment programs at the expense of more effective – and less costly – community-based programs. Keeping children with families, whether biological, adopted or foster parents, is far preferable, the report said, than placing them in group homes, residential programs, or other institutions.

Their findings echoed a U.S. Surgeon General's report released in 1999, which concluded that there was "weak evidence" that residential treatment programs helped improve the well-being of young people — and growing evidence that they actually do the opposite.

"All the research tells us that one of the drivers of delinquent behavior is association with delinquent peers," Patrick McCarthy, president-elect of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private, nonprofit agency, said. "So the notion that the best way to respond to delinquency is to put the child with other children with delinquent behavior challenges everything we know about delinquent behavior."

Nationally, the average rate of juvenile offenders living in publicly and privately operated facilities between 1997 and 2008 declined 26 percent, according to a report from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Delinquency Prevention. During that same period in Rhode Island, the rate fell 31 percent.

The population of Rhode Island juveniles in private and public residential facilities, including out-of-state programs, averaged 312 in 2007, the report said.

Rhode Island also is sending fewer juveniles out of state. The number of Rhode Island juveniles in out-of-state programs in fiscal 2009 averaged 108 per day, compared with 160 per day in fiscal 2008, according to the DCYF. The decline in out-of-state placements last year saved Rhode Island about \$3.8 million.

Almost all of those juveniles, with the exception of those placed at Glen Mills, were diagnosed with complex behavioral or mental health conditions, Garcia said, and needed care not available in Rhode Island.

Efforts by child welfare agencies around the country to reduce their reliance on residential programs, coupled with a weak national economy, have heightened competition among private providers to fill beds.

Until last year, for example, Ocean Tides, which operates a residential treatment program for male juvenile offenders in Narragansett, had a three-year contract with the DCYF, which guaranteed a steady stream of revenue. If a bed was empty for a few nights it didn't matter, because the state was still paying for it. (Jeremiah joked that he has referred so many teenage boys to Ocean Tides that the staff has dubbed him "Director of Admissions.")

But last year, to save money, the DCYF switched to paying some of its providers per day, per bed.

Ocean Tides wound up with empty beds that nobody was paying for. So it closed some of its units and reduced its available beds from 65 to 57 beds, said Ocean Tides' president, Brother Brendan Gerrity.

"You've got to make sure you keep the beds filled," he said, "Right now, we have a waiting list with about seven boys on it."

At Glen Mills, just under half of the beds are occupied by juveniles from Pennsylvania; the rest come from outside the state, said the school's admissions coordinator, Andy Shirlow. Glen Mills' enrollment in February was down to about 740 students, leaving 160 beds empty.

In February two admissions officers from the school came to Rhode Island at the request of Jeremiah. They interviewed more than a dozen teenage boys at the state training school for possible admission to Glen Mills.

The waiting lists at local programs, such as Ocean Tides, are one reason why Jeremiah says he turned to the school in Pennsylvania.

"If they don't go to Glen Mills," he said, "they stay at the training school."

Jeremiah said the DCYF officials have a "Rhode Island mentality" that 300 miles is too far away to send these teenage boys. "Kids grow up and they go away to college, right?"

The Rhode Island Training School's intake center is where teenagers who have run afoul of the law eat, sleep, and attend classes while the adults — lawyers, judges, probation officers, case workers — decide where they go next. Each week, admissions officers from residential providers from around the state, and sometimes beyond, visit the intake center to interview young offenders for their programs. They show the teenagers brochures with photographs of ocean surf and kids canoeing on pine-rimmed lakes. "Teaching minds, touching hearts, changing lives," reads one brochure from Ocean Tides.

Of the 12 teenage boys Jeremiah referred to Glen Mills, only three teens (ages 14, 15 and 16) have been admitted to the Pennsylvania school, according to the DCYF. Glen Mills rejected four teens who were taking prescription medications. Of the five others, one was accepted into a local residential program, one is on home confinement awaiting trial and the two others have been sentenced to the training school until they turn 19.

Though the average length of stay in the intake center is 30 days, 70 percent of the juveniles leave within two weeks, most of them for home, the Training School's acting superintendent, Kevin Aucoin, said.

Michael Gingras, a clinical social worker at the intake center, said some providers spend a half-hour or more talking with the juveniles at the intake center and showing them brochures.

“It’s not unusual for kids to get interviewed at lunchtime and say, ‘I want to go there!’ Gingras said.
“Then they get interviewed [by someone again] at dinner time and say, ‘I want to go here!’ ”

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