



Md., Calif. Suspend 'Scared Straight' Programs

Md., Calif. suspend prison diversion programs featured on TV's 'Beyond Scared Straight'

By DAVID DISHNEAU Associated Press

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Maryland and California prison officials said Friday they have suspended youthful offender diversion programs featured on the television show "Beyond Scared Straight" after the U.S. Justice Department warned they could lose federal funding.

The A&E series, which started Jan. 13, is produced by Arnold Shapiro, maker of the Emmy- and Oscar-winning 1979 television special, "Scared Straight." Like that show, it documents visits by troubled teenagers to prisons where intimidating inmates deliver in-your-face lectures about the harshness of life behind bars.

A prison agency spokesman in South Carolina, the only other state featured on the A&E Network series, said the diversion program will be reviewed by the state's incoming corrections chief.

The Justice Department said a study of nine such programs concluded they don't deter teenagers from offending. In fact, the youths were more likely to offend, according to Assistant Attorney General Laurie O. Robinson and Jeff Slowikowski, acting administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

"In light of this evidence, the U.S. Department of Justice discourages the funding of scared straight-type programs. States that operate such programs could have their federal funding reduced if shown not to have complied with the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act," the federal officials wrote in an op-ed piece published Monday in The (Baltimore) Sun.

Slowikowski said his office recently expressed these concerns to officials in the three states.

Maryland suspended its diversion programs Jan. 25 and ordered a review to make sure the programs have educational benefits to the youth, prisons spokesman Rick Binetti said.

The suspension was reported Thursday by The (Hagerstown) Herald-Mail.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation suspended its diversion programs Jan. 11 to ensure that they comply with the federal law, spokeswoman Terry Thornton said.

A&E Network spokesman Dan Silberman declined to comment.

"We just document what these programs do," he said.

The first episode of "Beyond Scared Straight" was shot nearly two years ago at the Maryland Correctional Institution at Jessup. It included a scene of two inmates appearing to throw an 18-year-old visitor into a utility room to demonstrate how easily inmates can be attacked by other prisoners out of the view of guards.

Binetti said the scene was planned and staged.

"What the cameras don't show is, along with the inmates are correctional officers and the youth counselors right there in the hallway with full view of any interactions with inmates," he said.



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