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## Juvenile safety feared

### 7 attempted suicides at Hinds facility

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Seven juveniles have attempted suicide at Hinds County's youth detention center since January, according to a report obtained by The Clarion-Ledger.

In one case, a girl was found with several socks tied around her neck, according to the report by Darron Farr, director of the Henley Young Juvenile Justice Center. In another case, a boy repeatedly hit his head on the door of his cell.

"Our officers are not trained for these kind of mental health issues," Farr wrote to County Administrator Vern Gavin in a letter dated May 22.

Responding to the report at a Board of Supervisors meeting Monday, District 3 Supervisor Peggy Calhoun said there are "serious issues" that could endanger detainees' safety at the center.

Calhoun said she fears more cases have not been reported to the board or the state by center staff.

"These incidents suggest that the children are not being supervised at all times," Calhoun said.

In addition to the attempted suicides, a guard, whose name was not released, suffered a knee injury last week while trying to quell a fight between two boys, according to the report.

"If a child is hurt at the center, then the Board of Supervisors is liable," Calhoun said.

The board is not being told about such incidents, even though the county is responsible for the detainees, Calhoun said.

Juveniles at the 84-bed center range in age from 10 to 17.

Farr did not return calls for comment.

But in his May 22 letter to Gavin, Farr wrote that the facility monitors all suicidal detainees closely.

All but one of the juveniles that attempted suicide were on medication, Farr wrote.

A majority of the juveniles who attempted suicide were placed in mental health facilities but returned to detention for disciplinary reasons, according to the letter.

"Therefore, there should be other alternatives for these mental health institutions instead of sending the juveniles back to the HYJJC after being placed in these facilities by the court or juvenile's counselor," Farr wrote.

The Mississippi Youth Justice Project, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center that advocates for juvenile detention reform, is concerned Henley Young does not have adequate staff or the ability to assist detainees with mental health problems, project director Bear Atwood said.

"The population (at the center) has too many with mental health issues that are not being served," she said.

The state Juvenile Facilities Monitoring Unit is scheduled to conduct a quarterly evaluation of the detention center June 10, agency director Donald Beard said.

The state requires youth detention facilities to file reports on suicides, but it has never received any from Henley-Young, Beard said.

A state evaluation done earlier this year found several violations of state and federal laws at the detention center.

Violations included runaways being locked up with criminal offenders, juveniles eating in their cells where they sleep and use the toilet and adults jailed where juveniles are held.

The evaluation listed 283 cases in which juveniles not charged with crimes were held in secure detention. The law states those juveniles, often runaways, should not be locked up with criminal offenders.

The state also cited at least one case in which an adult spent five hours in a locked cell on orders from Hinds County Judge Bill Skinner.

Supervisors President George Smith said those issues are being corrected and, if a new evaluation finds problems, those will be corrected, too.

"We've got to make sure we are in full compliance of the law," Smith said.

In January, Hinds supervisors voted 3-2 to take back control of the detention center about a year after handing it over to Skinner.

Skinner is seeking an injunction to stop supervisors from regaining control of the center. He would not comment on Farr's report.

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