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North Texas Courts Send Troubled Teens Out of State

Published : Tuesday, 23 Nov 2010, 9:10 PM CST



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FOX 4 News

DALLAS - A computer lab, weight room, indoor pool, movie theatre, and video arcade...and your tax dollars help pick up the tab. So, how do you sign up your kids? Well, you can't sign up for this program because it's ordered by a judge for troubled teens. But it's not a local facility. It's not even in Texas. So, when governments are facing major money problems, does it make sense to send young offenders thousands of miles out of state?

Howard Nick looks like a tough guy but chokes up easily when talking about his 14 year old grandson. In September, a Denton County Juvenile Court Judge sent Nathan to Glenn

Mills residential treatment facility outside of Philadelphia.

"I said the only way you can hurt me is to send him to Philadelphia," Nick says he told the probation officer. "We hadn't been separated in almost 15 years," Nick told FOX 4.

Nathan's juvenile records are confidential by law but Nick admits his grandson had problems with truancy, broke in to a car, and had probation violations.

Now, Nick feels like he has lost his grandson, whom he's raised since birth. Nick says he begged the county not to send the boy out of state.

"She called me and said they accepted him. And I said, 'oh, hell. Why so far away?' Nick told FOX 4. "I was so upset I couldn't talk to the probation officer."

Nick and his grandson are not alone. Denton County started sending juvenile offenders out of state last year. So far, taxpayers have shelled-out \$84,327 for four juveniles. Most of that comes from the feds and grant money.

Since 2005, Dallas County has sent 45 juveniles out of state to Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Arkansas at a cost of \$963,292.00. Of that cost, \$730,536.00 came directly from Dallas County taxpayers.

Tarrant County has sent 15 juveniles to out of state facilities since 2006, costing taxpayers \$538,063.00.

But Collin County has not sent a single juvenile offender out of state.

"We think it is very important that you keep the family involved," said Joe Scott, Director of Juvenile Probation.

Scott says it's not just the juvenile, but the entire family that requires intervention when a kid gets in trouble. In Collin County, troubled teens and their parents meet for intensive counseling. The kids attend classes and keep journals while the parents take part in parenting groups.

"We want to keep them in the community so the parents can be involved in what we are trying to accomplish because eventually, whether you send them out of county or out of state, they are going to return to their homes and the same problems that they had when they left," Scott told FOX 4.

FOX 4 spoke with a Collin County mother and her son, who did not want their faces shown but wanted it known the program helped save their family.

"Many times we do the wrong thing," the mother said. "We take the wrong action and we don't understand why a teenager makes a bad choice."

Mark Levin with the Texas Public Policy Foundation supports keeping troubled teens in their community because of cost and keeping families together.

"We've got to look everywhere we can to identify ways to do things more efficiently and save money while promoting public safety," said Levin. "I have not seen any evidence that shows that there is any reason that particular youths need to be sent 2000 miles away," Levin continued.

Dallas County Commissioner John Wiley Price says he has questioned the expense of sending kids out of state for twenty years but each year he is convinced there are no better alternatives. Price says it's only a last resort.

"The dollars are challenging but at the same time what do you do...continue to replicate and keep sending the child to a program where there's no results?" said Price. "We can decide to pay now or pay more later."

Howard Nick says he gets to talk to his grandson only once a week but he does receive letters. Nick hopes to visit Nathan in person soon. He says Juvenile Court Judge Darlene Whitten authorized his visit to Pennsylvania, courtesy of taxpayers.

"She ordered the probation department to fly me up there, three different trips, motel and everything paid by the probation department," Nick told FOX 4.

No one from Denton County Juvenile Services would talk about the specifics of Nathan's case because he is a minor.

Nick says his grandson will be gone for somewhere between six and nine months, hopefully no longer. Much depends on how well Nathan responds to the program.

"He said 'I am going to be real good so I can get out in 6 months,'" said Nick. Nick also says that when Nathan does get out they will be moving from Texas to another state.

"I am lost out here," said Nick. "What I don't understand is, why send him so far away?"

Denton County Juvenile Court Services, Peggy Fox told FOX 4 in writing that the county does not pay for parents to travel to visit their kids. She also says the cost is the same for in and out of state placements.

Tarrant County says it does pay for parents to travel and the majority of the kids are discharged successfully.

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