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## 'Intolerable situation' done: DJJ cuts ties with contractor at center of WOKV investigation



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By Stephanie Brown

**Jacksonville, FL** — The subject of a WOKV investigation is now out of the job in Florida.

We first told you last year about a combined seven teens escaping the Duval Academy on Jacksonville's Westside over just a few days. After months of digging, we found Florida Department of Juvenile Justice Inspector General reports blaming the escapes on a lack of training, poor maintenance, and insufficient policies by the private company that manages the facility, Youth Services International.

**GALLERY:** Teen offenders cause \$20,000 in damage at Duval Academy

Several employees were fired, new training was initiated, and infrastructure improvements were tackled- but no supervisors faced consequences, the multi-million dollar state contract continued, and months later, another batch of escapes.

Now, DJJ is ending all contracts with YSI.

"It's a positive development for the children who are in the Juvenile Justice system," says State Senator Rob Bradley.

Bradley is one of the lawmakers that called for a thorough review of the company and how the contract was being managed following WOKV's investigation. He says the decision to end ties is "appropriate" because of the continued problems.

"What was growing in to an intolerable situation," he says.

The Westside facility is a residential treatment program for non-violent male teen offenders which YSI started running in 2013, a five year state contract that grew in value to \$9.65 million. Now, however, they're ending that contract- and six other ones across the state- as part of a mediation agreement with the Florida Attorney General's Office.

Information from DJJ says the mediation centers on a whistleblower complaint from former staff of YSI saying the company failed to provide needed and appropriate services, and also falsified documents dealing with contract terms. Bradley and State Senator Audrey Gibson both spoke with the DJJ Secretary Wednesday about the contract termination, and they tell WOKV that our investigation was also a driver behind the State's probe.

"Make sure that those kids who are in our care are safe," Gibson says.

The DJJ says YSI will also reimburse the State for "financial losses" that aren't specified. We're working to get more information on this mediation and will update you on WOKV as that becomes available.

Gibson says she understands why it takes time to create change in something like this- noting the priority now needs to be a smooth transition that doesn't impact the teens- but is upset there wasn't action sooner. In Bradley's perspective, the system worked as it should.

"There be a swift investigation, that there be an attempt to correct those- any shortcomings- and that if the shortcomings are not corrected, that the contract be terminated. That's exactly what happened in this case," he says.

Youth Services International issued a statement to WOKV regarding the settlement, saying there is "no merit" to the whistleblower claims.

"It [YSI] made the decision to settle the case in an effort to put the four year litigation in the past and avoid the future cost and distraction of a continued legal defense regarding this matter," the statement says.

The management transition will take place in the next three months. YSI also formerly ran a St. Johns County facility, but that contract ended several months back.

Gibson says she plans to have a close eye on the company chosen to take over these facilities. Despite questions from WOKV, DJJ never accounted for their contract oversight which allowed the problems to build to the level they did- but they did increase monitoring and inspections in the aftermath of the escapes.

During the first escape in January 2015, two teens were able to walk off while being moved to an outdoor classroom by an employee the Inspector General found to have insufficient training despite being on the job several months. Poor groundskeeping contributed as well, according to the State, because the teens used an improperly discarded Christmas tree to help them get over the fence.

**GALLERY:** Duval Academy escapees flee, hop fence

In the second, unrelated escape just days later, five teens fled. The IG found such a severe maintenance backlog in the facility- in large part because of damage that had been caused by the teens in the weeks prior like kicking out windows- that the youths were able to essentially move around the housing modules freely. They caused \$20,000 in damage by throwing around furniture, destroying lights and cameras, and even ripping off a sprinkler to cause flooding. The teens were moved to another area while clean-up took place, but were left in the care of two YSI employees who had been transferred from the St. Johns County facility for the night and were not properly briefed on what was happening- and five were able to flee.

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While the situation escalated, some staff members told the IG they got to the point where they feared for their safety. Despite that, they claimed management told them not to contact police.

YSI and DJJ agreed upon widespread corrective action, which we were told had been implemented, however our continued investigation found that two more teens were able to escape the facility in October- after all the needed changes should have been in place. The full report on the circumstances around those escapes has not yet been completed, according to the DJJ.

"The central goal is to make sure that the public and the children who are in our custody are safe," Bradley says.

He adds that can't happen with the frequency of escapes and issues that were occurring. He says he expects the transition to be seamless, and the new contractor to come in with a renewed focus on giving youth the tools they need to get back on a better path.

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