

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## LAWSUIT SETTLEMENT

# Juvenile prisons to make changes

### Plan calls for more guards, medical workers

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The agency that runs Ohio's juvenile prisons has agreed to improve mental health and medical treatment for inmates, reduce violence and better rehabilitate youthful offenders.

The plan, filed yesterday in federal court, settles a lawsuit against the system. It calls for hiring 115 more guards to cut the ratio of inmates-to-guards and reduce assaults.

More mental-health workers will be hired and therapy programs revised to increase the odds that the youths, once out of prison, won't return.

Half of those released from Ohio's juvenile prisons return within three years.

The agreement also calls for sending more young felons to community treatment facilities instead of to one of the state's eight juvenile prisons. The state prison system has released 100 inmates in recent weeks, partly to reduce crowding.

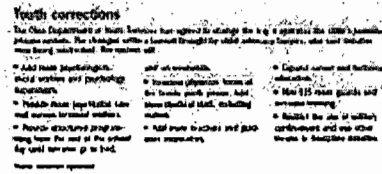
By agreeing to make changes, the juvenile prison system avoids a court battle with a group of child-advocacy lawyers, who sued the prison system, calling it violent and ineffective. Three class-action lawsuits have been filed against the system since 2004.

"We're at a place where we've never been before," said Jill Beeler, a state public defender who represents juvenile prisoners.

"What I'm hearing is there's a solid commitment to make the system better. ... The commitment has to be true. It can't just be talk."

A six-month *Dispatch* investigation of Ohio's juvenile prisons last year found a sharply rising rate of assaults, ineffective therapy programs and overuse of solitary confinement. Two inmates in 2006 spent four months straight in solitary and were let out only one hour a day.

Yesterday's agreement restricts how often and when prison employees can put youths in solitary confinement. Attorneys representing juvenile prisoners have said that they spend far too much time locked up in their rooms, not participating in programs to help them change their behavior.



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The prison mental-health staff is limited, and parents of inmates have said their children didn't receive proper diagnoses or didn't receive medication for their mental or physical illnesses.

The plan is estimated to add \$20 million to \$30 million annually to the system's budget of \$293 million. It now costs about \$80,000 a year for each juvenile prisoner.

It's unclear how the state will pay, said Tom Stickrath, director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services, which runs the juvenile prisons.

Initially, it will cost more to house and rehabilitate Ohio's youths, but eventually, moving to more community-based treatment could lower the cost, Stickrath said.

While attorneys filed an agreement yesterday for major changes to Ohio's juvenile prisons, Thomas Harris, 18, sat skeptical in a locked cell.

"They tell us 'We're going to hire more staff to make you feel safer and hire more social workers so we can get you on the road to success.' It never happens," he said in a telephone interview from prison.

Harris has been locked up for 2 1/2 years. In that time, he said he's gotten group therapy once every two weeks on average and has been beaten up 12 times. His leg has been fractured and his lip cut.

Inmates attacked one another or a guard 504 times in 2007 at the Marion County juvenile prison last year, up one-third from reports in 2006.

The plan also addresses overcrowding, which critics say leads to violence. More inmates likely will be released in the next few months to continue to cut a statewide prison population that now totals 1,585.

Inmates will be released only if they have served their minimum sentence and they've progressed in therapy, said Andrea Kruse, a prison spokeswoman.

"None of the youths will be released if they're not ready," Kruse said. "Anytime we release a kid, public safety is one of the most important things we consider."

Ideally, the plan will mean fewer young offenders will return to prison, Stickrath said.

"I think it really starts a new chapter," he said. "We've been in the papers for years. We've had issues for a lot of years."

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