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Changing culture, smaller population improve environment at Swanson

BY BARBARA LEADER • BLEADER@THENEWSSTAR.COM • JULY 7, 2010

At Swanson Center for Youth, a changing culture and decreasing population appear to be having a positive effect on the overall environment of the facility.

Representatives of the Office of Juvenile Justice, Swanson Center for Youth and Missouri Youth Services Institute told The News- Star's editorial board on Wednesday that the recent implementation of a social responsibility model is working.

"It's brought calm to the facility," Swanson Director Carolyn Atkins said. "The kids are appreciative, and they show that in their behavior."

Atkins said the incidences of violence at the facility have decreased since she joined the staff late last year.

However, a recent incident with a guard in the facility resulted in the arrest of three residents. "Three who were over 17 years old displayed unacceptable behavior in a sexual manner," she said. "At no point was anyone assaulted in any manner." The three youth were arrested but have now returned to the facility.

Atkins said the population at the Swanson facility is down from about 248 last year to about 194. Ideally, she said the number would be smaller than 100.

The social responsibility model focuses on small group counseling, works on changing the mindset of kids and teaches them to handle anger and disputes properly.

The staff hopes to further reduce the population when a moderate security facility opens next year in Columbia. That facility would house up to 48. Further reduction would depend on the construction of a facility in Acadiana.

Deputy Secretary of Juvenile Justice Mary Livers said the kids transferred to Columbia would be those considered a low-to-moderate risk to public safety. "They may have had a violent offense, but they are not considered an active risk to public safety," she said.

Livers said that a coordinated effort at the state level should result in an overall decrease of youth entering the system by using other social services resources prior to the justice system.

"At the end of the day, we have to spend the limited amount of dollars that we have changing these kids," she said. "If we don't, we're going to fill up Angola."