

Changes Promised at Juvenile Justice

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Maryland's new juvenile justice secretary said yesterday he will work to restore public confidence in a system that has been rocked in recent months by allegations of mismanagement, ineffectiveness and physical abuse of the teenagers in its custody.

"Our primary concern is to provide quality care to the youth under our supervision. That is number one. And to restore public faith in the system," said Bishop L. Robinson, who was formally appointed yesterday to the post he previously held on an acting basis.

Robinson steps into the job as the Department of Juvenile Justice is under intense scrutiny. Five top officials, including his predecessor as secretary, were ousted in December after reports appeared in the Baltimore Sun that boot camp guards routinely beat youths. Before that, a Montgomery County judge released a teenage rapist after determining that the department was not providing him with court-ordered therapy. And numerous studies have blasted the department for widespread failures.

Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D) said he chose the former Baltimore City police commissioner and three-term Maryland public safety secretary because he brings "extensive experience" and "impeccable credentials" to the job.

Robinson, 73, who will receive \$127,000 a year, is respected by many lawmakers and advocates who want improvements in the juvenile justice system. But some voiced concerns that his appointment alone may not be enough to turn around the department. They said the legislature has yet to pass bills that would create an independent commission to monitor complaints of abuse and would mandate other improvements.

"He's a good manager, yes, but he's not Superman. This legislation was intended to address very serious, deep-rooted problems," said Jim McComb, chairman of the Maryland Juvenile Justice Coalition, an umbrella organization of advocacy groups.

Several lawmakers said they do not support the bills because they believe Robinson is up to the task of addressing the problems. And they noted he will have more money to work with: A state budget awaiting Glendening's signature would boost spending on the department by 22 percent.

Glendening also said he thought the legislation isn't needed. "We ought to give the

new secretary a chance to show that he can do the right thing," the governor said at a news conference.

But Vincent Schiraldi, executive director of the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, worried that such assurances came from the same administration that claimed no knowledge of the alleged abuse of minors at state-run boot camps when it was reported in December. Schiraldi said an independent commission would have alerted state leaders to problems.

"Now, whatever comes down is coming down directly on the administration," he said.

Robinson, who had retired as public safety secretary in 1997 and worked as a private consultant to Lockheed Martin, returned to government work in December. He became acting secretary after the boot camp scandal erupted.

Yesterday, he said he is in the process of developing a new strategic plan, business practices and a code of conduct for department employees. He also is establishing an office of professional responsibility and accountability that he said will seek to ensure integrity throughout the system.

Asked to describe the challenge before him, Robinson had a one-word answer. "Big," he said. "Big. Big. Big."

Staff writer Daniel LeDuc contributed to this report.