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Juvenile Justice must be 'rebuilt'; Robinson says agency 'remained relatively unchanged since 1966'

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In a blistering assessment of Maryland's **juvenile justice system**, its acting secretary said yesterday that attacks by guards against delinquents at three state boot camps were part of a dysfunctional agency left a shambles by mismanagement.

Mentally ill youth are being jailed unnecessarily, drug abusers are not receiving treatment and probation is a grab bag of often-ineffective programs that has gone unevaluated for years, Secretary Bishop L. Robinson told a legislative hearing.

Summoned to Annapolis by lawmakers, Robinson told a Senate subcommittee that oversees the Department of **Juvenile Justice** that the agency cannot merely be tinkered with and is in dire need of an **overhaul**.

Gov. Parris N. Glendening named Robinson acting secretary in December after ousting Secretary Gilberto de Jesus and four of his aides. De Jesus was forced out in mid-December, a week after The Sun ran a series of articles documenting beatings against delinquents at the state-run camps and the failures of the probation **system** for **juveniles**.

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For the first time, Robinson, a former Baltimore police commissioner and state prisons chief, said publicly yesterday that he is considering an offer from the governor to become the permanent secretary.

Before doing so, he made it clear that whoever takes the post will have a lot of work to do. "This agency, based on all my reading and all my interviews, has remained relatively unchanged since 1966," he said. "Basically, it needs to be rebuilt from the ground up, from the front end to the back end."

Speaking and fielding questions from subcommittee members for about 90 minutes, Robinson said violence at the Garrett County boot camps was allowed to occur because they received little oversight from Baltimore or Annapolis.

"My findings were that the camps basically operated in isolation," Robinson said. "There were no internal controls to monitor the operations of the camps."

The camps invented their own "use of force" policy, separate from that used by every other **juvenile** facility in the state, he said, adding that forms completed by guards to document how injuries to the **juveniles** occurred were "suspect" but tolerated by camp administrators.

For example, a **juvenile** taken to the hospital for stitches was injured, according to a camp guard's report, by purposely banging his head into the pavement during a struggle. Other reports said **juveniles** injured themselves by falling down stairs or resisting guards.

In chronicling assaults against a group of 14 **juveniles** known as Charlie Squad at one of the camps over 20 weeks, The Sun also cited internal agency reports that showed dozens of cases of delinquents being injured by guards.

Before Glendening appointed him acting secretary, Robinson led a task force to look into the newspaper reports. The panel quickly concluded that guards had been beating **juveniles** at the camps since the first one opened in 1996 and that top state officials knew of the assaults but failed to stop them. The governor and Lt.

Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend suspended the camps the next day.

Glendening and Townsend had ordered any abuses to stop in August, they said, after the newspaper began asking questions about attacks on Charlie Squad. After the articles were published, Glendening and Townsend said that de Jesus had assured them that there were no problems at the camps.

Robinson's panel reported that the beatings were widespread, often severe and continued into December, months after the governor and lieutenant governor first learned of them.

Former state Sen. Decatur W. Trotter, who served on the task force, told the subcommittee yesterday that guards at the camps were out of control. "Administratively, it was a mess," the Prince George's Democrat said. "It was breaking legs, knocking teeth out of mouths, that sort of thing."

Nevertheless, Trotter and Robinson told the subcommittee that they favored the boot camp concept.

Robinson, one of the architects of Maryland's adult boot camps, which began operating in

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1990, said that **juvenile** camps should be designed for nonviolent offenders and that guards should be better trained. Half of the guards at the Garrett camps had been disciplined for various offenses over the past two years, he said.

"When you see a pattern of disciplinary problems like that," he said, "you have a training problem."

Robinson said he is working with the governor and lieutenant governor to determine what to do with the camps, which are now being used to house delinquents without the military components. One of the camps, the Meadow Mountain Leadership Challenge, is to be converted into a residential treatment center for substance abusers, he said.

Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman, a Baltimore Democrat, said Robinson's report that mentally ill delinquents were being jailed rather than treated did not surprise her; nor did reports that the agency's facilities are overcrowded, supervision is lacking and probation

programs are a mess.

But most disturbing, she told the subcommittee, were the reports of violence, once widespread in Maryland. "To think that today we are repeating the same errors is terrifying," she said.

Jim McComb, chairman of the Maryland **Juvenile** Justice Coalition, said Robinson's testimony before the subcommittee was thorough but that he would not count on any real change unless the governor can name a qualified candidate, such as Robinson, to replace de Jesus. "It all boils down to who sits in that chair," he said.

Robinson told reporters after the hearing that he was considering taking over the agency permanently. "I have considered the offer, but I have not reached a final decision," he said.

Robinson said he would continue as acting secretary until April, when the legislative session ends.

Also yesterday, **juvenile** justice advocates from across the state met in Annapolis to discuss their legislative agenda, which includes establishing an independent commission to monitor the **Juvenile** Justice Department. The advocates said that increased public awareness about the department gives them a chance to press for reforms that go beyond the boot camps.

Overcrowding in **juvenile** centers, lengthy detentions and the disproportionate number of black youths sent to **juvenile** jails are issues that must be addressed, they said.

Juvenile justice officials "need to sit down and look at their mission," said Heather A. Ford, director of the Maryland **Juvenile** Justice Coalition. "And in doing that, they need to do it in a way that is not reactionary, but is planned and focused."

Sun staff writer M. Dion Thompson contributed to this article.