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Robinson wrong on teen jail injuries

Advocates renew call for citizen oversight

By Todd Richissin
Sun Staff

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Bishop L. Robinson, secretary of the Department of Juvenile Justice, arrived armed with numbers and complaints when he appeared before state legislators Tuesday. For 10 minutes, he criticized The Sun for reporting that guards at the state's three largest juvenile jails were assaulting teens in their care.

He focused most intently on one statistic in an article published Nov. 25 that said Frederick Memorial Hospital had treated 124 people last year from the Victor Cullen Center, many of them teens suffering from cuts and broken bones. He waved a letter from the hospital at the legislators and told them that the newspaper had purposely deceived them and its readers.

The true number of Victor Cullen teens treated for injuries, he said, was two.

If accurate, that would have been an astonishing discrepancy and strong evidence that conditions in the jails have drastically improved since he took over the department in December 1999.

But Robinson was wrong.

Maureen E. Connor, director of medical records at the hospital, said the information Robinson presented to a House subcommittee did not represent the number of teens treated for injuries at the emergency room.

Rather, she said, the secretary had information on the number of teens whose medical bills were the responsibility of Victor Cullen - two. The others were covered by insurance.

Robinson's misstatements, made in the process of defending his department, inadvertently gave advocacy groups for children new energy in their demands that an independent citizens group - not government workers - be permitted to inspect the facilities.

"It speaks loudly for an independent, agreed-upon monitoring system," said Jann Jackson, executive director of Advocates for Children and Youth. "The fact we're two years into the process [of reform] and there's such a discrepancy in numbers shouts for citizen oversight."

She and other advocates interviewed about Robinson's remarks stressed that they were not accusing him of purposely presenting false numbers to the legislators.

If the secretary had reviewed his department's files, he would have seen that scores of teens from Victor Cullen were treated for injuries last year at Frederick Memorial.

Earlier this year, The Sun, using state public records laws, obtained dozens of reports from Robinson's department on juveniles at Victor Cullen who were taken to the hospital's emergency room last year.

For example, on Aug. 29, a teen was taken to the hospital after complaining of numbness and tingling in his arms and legs after an altercation with a guard.

"... advised to send to emergency department by ambulance on a backboard. 911 called," a Victor Cullen staff member wrote on the report.

On Sept. 12, a juvenile involved in a run-in with a guard was taken to the hospital, bleeding from his chin. "Nurse ... recommended he be transported to Frederick Memorial Hospital for possible stitches," the staff report said.

Another teen, on July 9, was taken to Frederick Memorial for shoulder X-rays after a confrontation with a guard, according to a report written by a jail staff mem-

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ber. "... both nurses recommended that student be sent to Frederick Memorial Hospital for treatment," the report said.

On March 13, a teen suffered an "excessive nosebleed" in a dispute with a guard, according to a staff report. The youth was taken to Frederick Memorial for X-rays.

In all, Robinson's agency provided The Sun with 46 reports of teens from Victor Cullen who were taken to Frederick Memorial Hospital, including cases in which youths tried to commit suicide. (The hospital told The Sun that there were 124 emergency room visits from the facility last year.)

In addition to the 46 reports in which The Sun could ascertain that juveniles were taken to the hospital, others received by the newspaper were either missing pages or so incomplete that it could not be determined how or where injuries were treated.

A report on Dec. 22, for example, states only that a teen was "taken to doctor" because his teeth went into his lip during an altercation with a guard and that he had injuries to a leg and rib.

In other cases, The Sun could not determine whether an injured teen was taken to the hospital because full reports were not provided to the newspaper. Instead, synopses of the reports were given.

In addition, some documents containing information about physical abuse at the jail last year were destroyed, altered or never completed, according to officials from Correctional Services Corp., the private company that operates Victor Cullen.

Robinson declined to be interviewed for this article.

His spokeswoman, Laura Townsend, said Robinson's testimony before the House Education and Economic Development subcommittee was based on information he had received from Frederick Memorial.

She said Robinson used information from the hospital rather than his department because he had not yet reviewed last year's reports and because The Sun had cited information from Frederick Memorial in its Nov. 25 article.

A review is under way, she said.

Robinson's criticism of The Sun's article on violence at the juvenile jails did not stop at the number of emergency room visits. He said the newspaper also tried to mislead readers by using reports from last year.

The Sun stated seven times that the reports cited in the article were from last year, the most recent ones that the Department of Juvenile Justice would make available. The reports were requested in October 2000, and the last of them arrived at the newspaper this past summer.

In lieu of individual reports, The Sun also requested - both before the Nov. 25 article and after Robinson's testimony - the total number of reported assaults at the jails in 2001, for comparison purposes. Townsend said after both requests that the information was not available.

The Sun requested the total again yesterday using state public records law. The department said totals, but not individual reports, may be available today.

"It's extremely disappointing that the administration is spending it's time trying to discredit reports of the violence rather than working to end it, especially when it's pretty well accepted by everybody involved that those facilities are loaded with problems," said Vincent Schiraldi, executive director of the nonprofit Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice in Washington.

He, too, renewed a call for a citizen oversight commission, which the administration has rejected.

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