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Progress made, work to do

By W.G. "Bill" Bankhead
 Posted March 1 2004

For 25 years, I have fought tirelessly for troubled children in the juvenile justice system, believing we could make a difference, and when we did, many more of our state's youth would get the second chance they deserved. When I became secretary, I committed myself to this ideal, realizing the challenges are substantial, but knowing we could make Florida's system better. Omar Paisley's death will be for me a continual reminder we have more work to do.

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The death of a young person is unacceptable. It is even more heart-rending if it could have been prevented. I am appalled by findings of the Miami-Dade grand jury. We have taken swift action in light of this report. The superintendent, the top management responsible for oversight of this center and the assistant secretary for detention services are no longer employed with Department of Juvenile Justice. A new phone system has been installed and about \$500,000 is being invested to replace the surveillance and video system.

We will continue to take necessary actions as new information comes to light. The findings from the Inspector General's Final Report will provide opportunity for further action. Problems at Miami-Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center will be remedied quickly and lessons learned applied throughout the system.

We will also continue to make reforms at the Florida Institute for Girls, the only residence for our most violent juvenile females and the alternative to adult prison. As of Dec. 31, more than 70 percent of the girls at the institute had committed at least one violent felony and more than half had committed two or more such crimes. Failure is not an option in this case, which is why I am replacing the service provider. We will take action to improve this facility.

It may seem to some that the department has nothing but bad news to report; however, the good news is remarkable. Since 1999, the at-risk youth population increased by 13 percent, but youth referred to us decreased 3.5 percent. Considering both factors, 17,000 of Florida's youth avoided being referred to the department last year. This suggests the early intervention efforts of department staff, stakeholders and community volunteers are working.

We have made progress, but we have much more to do. The

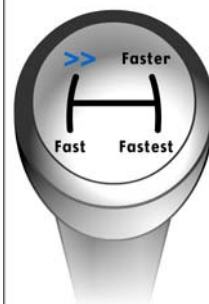
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inexcusable death of a youth leaves an indelible mark that we will never forget.

As I take leave to attend to my health, I remain confident that everyone at DJJ is committed to working with the Legislature to address the issues related to Miami-Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center, and to make changes necessary system-wide.

W.G. "Bill" Bankhead is secretary of the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.

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