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LOCAL

As Youth Services International exits Florida, critics ask: Why are for-profit businesses in charge of youthful offenders?

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Palm Beach Post

It's almost impossible to talk about Youth Services International exiting the Florida juvenile system without also talking about privatization.

"We should recognize as a community that we cannot derive profit off the punishment and rehabilitation of kids," said Gordon Weekes, the Broward County chief assistant public defender who for years has locked horns with YSI over the treatment of kids in its care.

"This should never have been a profit center."

Florida's Department of Juvenile Justice long ago began putting the care and treatment

Palm Beach County Juvenile Correctional Facility, which YSI ran for years.

Palm Beach County Juvenile Correctional Facility, which YSI ran for years.

of juveniles bound for residential, treatment or detention facilities into the hands of private companies.

YSI was among the first to ink contracts and among the first to start chalking up troubling reports dating to its mid-1990s management of a Pahokee lockup: not enough staffers, not enough food and too much violence.

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Last week, DJJ announced it was severing the company's seven contracts as part of a whistleblower suit settlement. The whistleblowers, all former YSI employees, had reported, among other things: not enough staffers, not enough food and too much violence. (YSI said that, even though the suit was without merit, it settled because it wanted to put the long-running litigation behind it.)

Caroline Isaacs

Caroline Isaacs

But, said Caroline Isaacs, Arizona director for the American Friends Service Committee, "This is not about a single bad actor or a few bad apples. It is inherent in the effort to make money and is driven by the concerns and needs of shareholders."

"Oh, I never fault the companies on this stuff," said Paul Wright. That's a bit out of left field coming from Wright, a former prison inmate, the founder and Executive Director of the Human Rights Defense Center and editor of the award-winning Prison Legal News, which has for years has taken on prison privatization in all its manifestations.

Paul Wright

Paul Wright

But, said Wright, nobody should be surprised when a for-profit company finds ways to make profits.

"Let's take them at their word they are in the business of making money," he said. Cutting costs is part of the deal, he pointed out.

"It's not their fault that government continues to shovel money at them."

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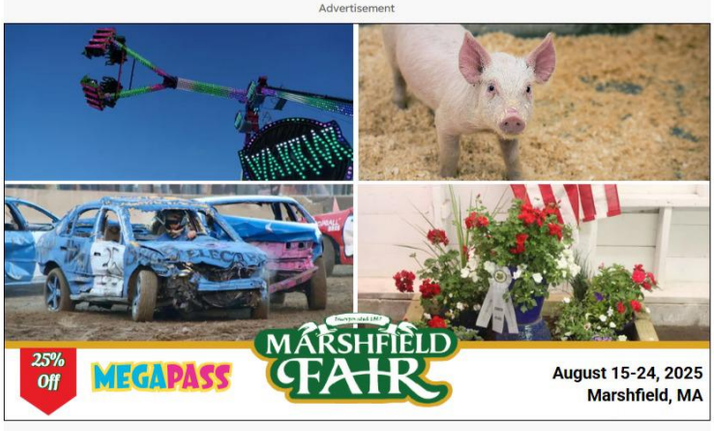

Weekes said YSI's exit give DJJ an opportunity: a small, state-run facility that incorporates the best practices of juvenile detention. "Take the the profits we are paying to companies and get down to core element of what a child needs to get back on the right track," he said. "Once we have best practices, we can replicate that.

"We can't just keep throwing good money after bad at the YSIs of the world."

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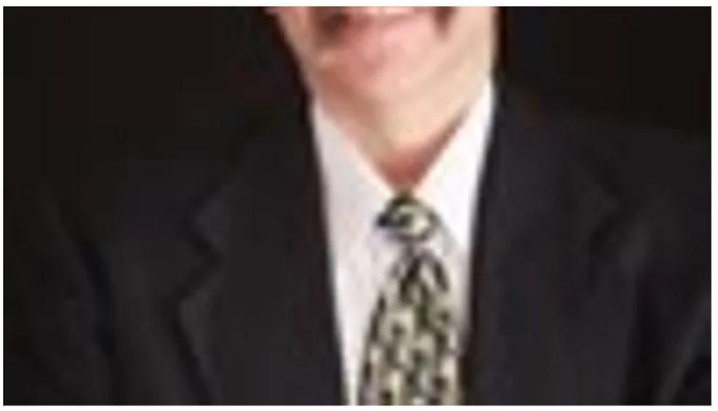

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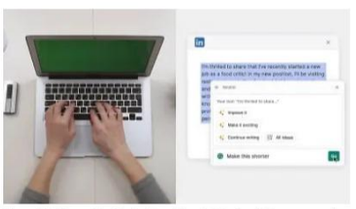

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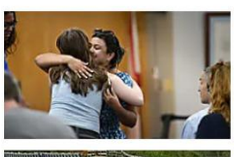

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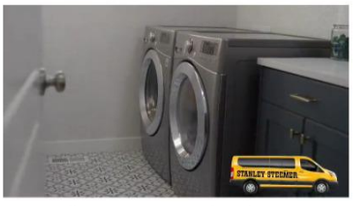

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