Pahokee juvenile jail a vestige of company's troubled past

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When Pahokee got the nod for housing a juvenile prison in 1995, no one was happier than the mayor of the tiny Glades town.

Ramon Horta had pleaded for money to buy 50 acres where the prison could be located. "I'm not standing here, I'm kneeling," Horta told Palm Beach County commissioners.

And after the state selected Pahokee and began negotiating with Correctional Services Corp. to run the prison, Horta was ecstatic. “The best thing that ever happened to Pahokee,” he crowed.

As it turned out, it was a good thing for Horta, too: The first manager the private prison company hired when it came to town was the mayor.

The state ethics commission later cleared Horta of any conflict of interest. In fact, the prison company went on to hire a Pahokee commissioner as well.

The controversy that followed was the first in a string of missteps by CSC. The company’s juvenile operations later became Youth Services International, which has since won millions of dollars in state contracts, establishing its own trail of troubles along the way.

In the mid-1990s, though, the state had high hopes for both the company and the first-of-its-kind Glades facility. The legislature was newly enthused about hiring private companies to run Florida lockups. And national headlines about so-called “super predator” teenagers made lawmakers eager to crack down on juvenile crime.

The prison-like 350-bed Pahokee Youth Development Center for teens ages 14 to 18 was hailed by those who believed juveniles were being coddled.

It opened in January 1997.

Just eight months later, Dade County Circuit Judge Thomas Petersen reported “physical and psychological conditions (that) bordered upon child abuse.”

Teenagers told the judge they were locked in solitary confinement, stripped to their underwear or left naked, and not allowed to sit down or fall asleep. One 14-year-old told The Palm Beach Post he was chained to a cell bed because he had asked for toilet paper.

Petersen declared meals were “absolutely inedible” and skimpy to boot: The company was spending an estimated $4.50 daily to feed each youth, he said, instead of the generally accepted $10 per day.

Correctional Services founder James Slattery flatly denied Petersen’s findings, as did other executives. Meals conformed to state standards, they said. Punishment was meted out appropriately.

But a nationally known consultant hired by South Florida public defenders echoed the judge’s criticisms. “This facility is a disaster waiting to happen,” he told The Post. “I would argue to close it down totally.”

One year after the prison opened, half of all Pahokee’s child abuse reports came from the facility, an “abnormally high” number of allegations, said a state child abuse supervisor.

At times it seemed violence threatened to spill out of control. Beatings left one teenager with blurred vision and impaired hearing. Another sustained a broken jaw that the facility dentist didn't diagnose for a month. One was beaten so badly he had to have his spleen removed. Fifteen cases of child abuse were confirmed.

Staffers weren't always safe, either. Three teenage offenders assaulted one guard with a wrench stuffed in a sock.

But staff, some of them new to corrections after working at McDonald's, Winn-Dixie and as field laborers, contributed to the violence. Ten were fired for failing to stop fights or using excessive force. And violent incidents weren't always recorded. Eleven teenagers were treated for broken bones in 60 days, according to a 1999 report, but the center could only produce reports on five injuries.

Initially, the Department of Juvenile Justice showed no inclination to cancel CSC's contract.

While acknowledging the center was not making improvements as quickly as it would like, "We're dealing with a corporation that's making a good effort," said the Juvenile Justice's chief of operations.

In 1998, though, a state-hired consultant came across a company memo calling for 10 teens to be kept beyond their release dates, a money-making decision for CSC: The state paid the company roughly $68.40 per youngster, per day.

More than any report of abuse, the incident stirred up Tallahassee. "I'll bet the farm that this has happened before," said Rep. Alex Villalobos, R-Miami, after hearings on the center by the House Criminal Justice budget committee.

Slattery admitted the error. Employees behind the decision were disciplined. State juvenile justice officials once again weighed in on CSC's behalf, telling lawmakers the company was correcting problems.

Teens continued to complain they were abused by staffers, another state inspection found. There weren't always enough guards or teachers. Filthy urinals, broken locks and little supervision of increasing numbers of teens placed on psychiatric drugs were all cited by inspectors, who subsequently gave the center a failing grade.

Citing the report, Palm Beach County Juvenile Court Judge Ron Alvarez compared the center to a "Third World country that is controlled by … some type of evil power," and gave CSC seven weeks to shape up.

State officials were ready to call it quits. Months before CSC's $30 million deal was set to expire — and one week before a slated Palm Beach County court hearing on conditions — CSC said it was dropping the Pahokee contract.

It was, said state officials, a mutual decision.