Florida Juvenile Justice: Check Private "Employee's" Records? What a Concept

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Florida Juvenile Justice: Check Private "Employee's" Records? What a Concept By David M. Reutter Guards employed by private contractors that operate Florida juvenile justice programs earn some of the lowest wages in the nation. The result is high turnover, which causes untrained and unqualified persons to be hired. The biggest problem, however, is that private contractors often hire persons who have been terminated by other juvenile programs for abusing the Beery children they are hired to mentor and protect Hiring Abusers A Palm Beach Post Review of Records from Florida's Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and 40 of his contractors uncovered at least 200 employees hired at juvenile justice centers in recent years after they were fired from similar jobs for violence, misconduct, or incompetence. The DJJ downgraded this finding by saying of these 200 employees are a small percentage of the thousands who work in the system. DJJ, of course, is the same agency that wishes to hide the 661 documented cases of child abuse within its programs over the last nine years. Two-thirds of those cases occurred since 2001. Regularly, those who are fired by one DJJ program are hired within days by another program. Jimmy Haynes was a behavioral specialist at a privately operated program, The Center for Drug-Free Living (CDF) in Orlando. In that capacity, he had to supervise Manuel Marrero. Manuel's father, Gustavo, acknowledged his son can be very difficult. By the time he was sent to the program following an arrest, for grand theft, Manuel was smoking marijuana, skipping school, and defying his father. The program was not working for Manuel. He was consistently threatening and attacking staff members. Feeling threatened by Manuel, Haynes punched the fifteen-year old in the face. Haynes lost his job. Shortly after the incident, Manuel was transferred to the Orange County Regional Juvenile Detention Center (OCRJDC), which is operated by the state. Among OCRJDC's staff was an employee who had already displayed an inability to control his temper around antagonistic teens. It was Haynes, who was hired by OCRJDC nine days after being fired at CDFL. Low Pay Means Hiring Questionable Types According to the Florida Juvenile Justice Association (FJJA), the typical starting pay for employees at Florida's private-one juvenile programs is $17,500 to $18,000 a year. That contrasts with the $22,751 paid to

employees of state-run facilities. To fill their employment vacancies, private contractors often hire persons
with past criminal convictions, previous employment histories of abusing
children, or who are untrained. The vacancies often require workers to
work double or 16 hour shifts. Employees at juvenile centers are expected to be both a role models and
disciplinarians. It takes a special kind of person to positively encourage
youngsters well having to break up fights, prevent suicide, confiscate
weapons, and foil is capes. At the same time, they must endure being
threatened and cursed by teens. Most companies either can't afford or aren't willing to pay for qualified
employees. Instead, they hire anyone willing to accept their low wages.
The Post found that contractors hired people whose a recent work
experience included stints at a doughnut shop, a turnpike toll booth, and a
grocery store. Some guy jobs fresh off being fired by private security
firms, while other new youth care workers were still teenagers themselves." Records reveal that leased 138 juvenile workers listed as active had been
arrested and punished for felony charges ranging from credit card and check
fraud to cocaine trafficking and burglary. Of course, this hiring practice
is consistent with that of the Florida Department of Corrections, who has
hired criminals to guard its prisoners. High Turnover DJJ employees at state-run programs have a median length of service of 3.3
years. Employees at private-run programs last less than eight months. 62.5 percent of workers at private programs will quit or are fired in any
given year. The annual turnover is just 19.4 percent at state-run
programs. Those employees, however, qualify for state pension plans and
earn up to $6,000 more per year. "I don't care who you work for," says Mark Fontaine, who represents
private contractors as head of the FJJA. If you pay people $6,000 more,
you're going to get more people working that you want working for you and a
few that you don't. That's just that." At Correctional Services Corporations (CSC), Joann Bridges Academy,
workers start at $7.21 an hour or $15,000 a year. The highest-paid worker
at any CSC program starts at $8.89 an hour. The $18,500 a year earned by
youth workers at Broward County's Thompson Academy is a hardship upon those
paying the County's median annual rent of $10,000. In contrast to the low wages, Jimmy Haynes, who was fired for punching the
15 year-old, says his new job driving a recycling truck for the city of
Orlando is much easier and earns him $13 an hour. Outsourcing Government Duties
Florida's juvenile justice system has 26 detention centers that house
youngsters shortly after arrest. A judge then sentences them to one of 154
long-term programs that range from wilderness camps to maximum-security

facilities that look like prisons. To cut costs, Florida outsourced nearly all of its residential programs.
Florida now has one of the highest rates of privatization in the country
-about nine in 10 are managed by contractors. Gov. Jeb Bush has made outsourcing Government operations a hallmark of his
administration since taking office six years ago. An amazing 41 percent of
the State's $57 billion budget is in contract services. State officials say outsourcing can reduce costs by 10%. For example, an
Alachua County halfway house 14 of vendors cost the state nearly $767,000 a
year. A private contractor now operates the program for about $682,000, an
11 percent reduction. The State has no concern for what private contractors pay its employees or
how much they spend on kids and their programs. One of the reasons we
privatizes the theory that private corporations can do a better and cheaper
than we may be able to do," said Steve Casey, DJJ's deputy secretary.
Sold to a degree, we stay out of that." The state exhibits no concern about how much its contractors pay to make
friends in Tallahassee. CSC, for instance, has spent at least $270,000 on
state campaign contributions over the last decade, and its executives have
donated thousands more. "You get what you pay for down here," says Palm Each County Circuit Judge
Ronald Alvarez. Enabling Bad Employees to Get Jobs The system itself and Abel's employees that have been fired to get another
job within the juvenile justice system. Although state law requires
private contractors to open their employees files, most contractors
clinging to a culture of silence and give neutral references. Out of fear they could be sued for giving a bad reference, private
contractors often leave unmentioned violent rages, suspicions of sex with
teenagers, and reports of gross incompetence. State law requires private companies to disclose worker's files because
they perform a public function. Several contractors told The Post that
under federal privacy laws they did not have to disclose their files.
After DJJ officials told him otherwise, they open the files, but still
refuse to share them with other contractors. One contractor, Miami's Bay Point Schools, refused to open its files
despite the DJJ saying disclosure was an obligation that could result in
termination of Bay Point's contract. DJJ's threat was idle. Two months
later The Post had to sue Bay Point to obtain disclosure of the records. Private contractors and the DJJ operate in isolation and have no access to
a central database of juvenile Justice workers' job histories. The State
Inspector General's Office conducts a review to determine if the staff
member is at fault when accused of serious misconduct. The result often

takes months, by which time to work there may have a new job working with kids. The saddest part about this whole hiring fiasco is that overworked, under trained, and unqualified juvenile workers create a culture of violence and neglect that undermines the juvenile justice's essential mission: preventing teens from becoming adult felons. Children are not a high priority in Florida," said Judge Alvarez. Very few people in the positions of power are willing to say "What will it take to safeguard our children?" Sources: The Palm Beach Post; The Miami Herald; Associated Press; www.tallahassee.com.

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