

NEWS | HOUSTON & TEXAS

Lights out for troubled youth camps

State putting end to annual funds

By **RICHARD STEWART**, *Copyright 2001 Houston Chronicle East Texas Bureau*
Aug 13, 2001



APPLE SPRINGS -- The teen-agers hiking up the eroded, sandy trail through the deep woods to the open-walled huts they called home knew nothing about tight state budgets and bureaucracies.

They just knew that soon they and everyone else at the Bob Lanier Therapeutic Wilderness Program for Boys would soon have to be somewhere else.

Soon they would have to leave the sense of structure and community they had learned at this 236-acre compound in the Davy Crockett National Forest.

The camp and the Elizabeth G. Lanier Therapeutic Wilderness Program for Girls -- which were founded in 1972 by the future Houston mayor, his then-wife and others -- are closing this month.

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The nonprofit [Hope Center for Youth and Family Services](#), which operated the camps, this year lost the \$1.8 million in state funding it had received annually, and its officials say it must close.

"I'm going to miss it here," said Chris, a round-faced 16-year-old with the wispy beginnings of a goatee. "I'm proud that I've been able to stick it out here."

"I didn't think I could stand it when I was first here, but I've done real well," said Nick, 14, his dark eyes shining.

Both boys seemed to revel in the pure primitiveness of the place, which is precisely the point.

The remoteness, the absence of television, radio or even electricity or flush toilets in the sleeping areas -- all seemed like an adventure to them.

It's an adventure that has been undertaken by troubled teens for 29 years but is about to end. Hope Center President [Hector Garcia](#) said the center cannot make ends meet without the state money.

"That was 60 percent of our annual budget," said Garcia, 65, who took over the Houston-based Hope Center several years ago after retiring as head of community relations for the [Metropolitan Transit Authority](#). "Without that money, the board just found it impossible to go on."

The Hope Center has strong ties to Houston. Its headquarters are on Richmond, and the organization once operated an alternative school on Yoakum. It owns an 18-unit apartment building on San Jacinto where troubled teens used to stay. Finances forced the Hope Center to discontinue the school and the residential center in recent years.

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Garcia said he doesn't know what's going to become of the campgrounds and buildings.

Lanier was studying wilderness camps while seeking help for his son's drug problem when he decided Houston and East Texas needed the Hope Center. Lanier helped organize the private foundation and donated \$1.5 million to build the camps.

"I knew that a lot of young people could be helped in places like this, but many people didn't have the ability to pay for it," Lanier said. "We thought this could be a way to help some young people who needed it."

The Hope Center camps serve 12- to 16-year-olds from all over the state and from all sorts of situations. Some are sent by county child probation departments, others from the Department of [Protective and Regulatory Services](#). Some are enrolled by their parents. All have been in some sort of trouble and are in danger of getting into worse trouble in the future, Garcia said.

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The whole idea of a wilderness camp, Garcia said, "is to get these kids completely away from the environment they had been in."

"This is so different from where they came from that they can start all over again in a structured, secure environment," he said.

Their tent mates become their family, he said, and "all of the other campers become their community."

Typically for 10 months, as many as 55 youths -- and their counselors -- sleep in tentlike huts with no electricity. At each campsite is a single cold-water spigot, a mess hall where campers cook their own meals on weekends over wood fires, a latrine and a central gathering spot. Campers sit on big peeled logs several times a day to talk over plans and hash out problems.

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Campers soon learn to "circle up," Garcia said. They talk out problems before they escalate into hard feelings or violence. Sometimes they just tell stories, sing songs, write poetry or relax.

Campers spend most of every weekday at a central area where there are air-conditioned classrooms operated by local school districts, as well as a dining hall and offices for counselors and other support staff.

There's no hazing or boot-camplike activities, Garcia said. "In boot camp, they tear them down to build them back up," he said. "Our kids come to us already torn down. We're here to build them up."

Every year, the campers take down and rebuild some of their huts or other facilities. "This lets them know that they can accomplish things," Garcia said.

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The Spartan living conditions have drawn criticism from time to time. In 1996, some lawmakers questioned the DPRS for placing wards in the camps. Garcia and his staff insist that the campers were treated well.

There have been success stories.

The grandfather of Carey, a 16-year-old from Kirbyville who recently spent time at the boys camp, said he spent \$20,000 for a month in a psychiatric facility for the troubled teen. But five months at the camp changed Carey's life, the grandfather said.

"The boy got back and was completely different from the boy we sent them," he said.

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Carey said he hated the camp at first. But after making friends and realizing the key to success there was cooperation, he said, he changed his mind.

"Even while you're working, it was fun," he said.

Without television or video games to distract him, Carey said, he had time to think about his life. Now he plans to finish high school and go on to college to study parks and wildlife.

Such stories did not come cheaply, Garcia said.

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The camp employed almost as many people -- 83 -- as it had campers. It cost the camp about \$3,200 a month to house, feed and counsel a camper.

Counties, other agencies and occasionally families paid for some of the campers, but by far the largest part of the operation's funding came from the state.

"That is why the money from the state was so crucial," Garcia said.

Garcia said the state appropriation -- administered by the DPRS -- covered the daily costs for counties that couldn't afford them.

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In exchange for the money, the Hope Center promised slots for 25 DPRS teen-agers. Some days there were fewer kids, sometimes more. Last year, there was an average of 26 a day, Garcia said.

Some lawmakers were quick to point out the DPRS could have enrolled children in far less expensive programs.

There are other youth camps with somewhat similar programs in Texas, but none is directly funded by the state like the Hope Center.

"How fair is that to have, in effect, most-favored-agency status?" asked state Rep. [Jim McReynolds](#), D-Lufkin.

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McReynolds said he is a longtime supporter of the camps but that the group's appropriation just stuck out as something different from similar agencies during every legislative session.

State Rep. Garnet Coleman, D-Houston, agreed. He said he and other supporters of the Hope Center would often have to fight to keep the group included in the budget, but during the last legislative session the budget battle just got too tough.

In the end, McReynolds said, there was just a general feeling in the Legislature that it was time for the center to lose its unusual funding and have to compete for state dollars just like other agencies.

"There was no one leading a charge against it," he said.

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Lanier said that for years the Hope Center had strong allies like former Lt. Govs. Bob Bullock and Bill Hobby. "But they're gone now," he said.

"I should have seen it coming," Garcia said.

Pay for the last of the staff members is scheduled to end in a few weeks. Still, Garcia said he isn't giving up hope that something can be done to keep the camps alive.

"I'm spending all day, every day, talking with other groups trying to find a way to combine this with their programs. Anything to keep this place open," he said.

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After all, he noted, Hope is the name of his center.

Aug 13, 2001

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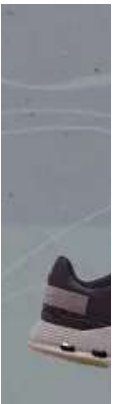
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