

Conversations Over Manson Reforms Continue

by Lisa Backus

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A child advocacy group remains concerned about conditions at the Manson Youth Institution in spite of a settlement with the state Department of Correction that forced the agency to comply with safety measures while providing in-person school and mental health services for the teens there.

“We have grave concerns for the population,” said Marisa Halm, an attorney with the Connecticut Center for Children’s Advocacy and the director of the organization’s Youth Justice Project.

Halm acknowledged that officials at the DOC has been responsive to several recommendations that came out of the settlement. “But we still feel there’s farther to go with the recommendations,” Halm said.

The prison, which houses about 50 male juveniles under age 18, has become the focal point of multiple investigations, complaints and a push by juvenile justice advocates to remove the youth to a therapeutic setting.

Manson also houses about 300 males ages 18 to 21 who are kept separate from the juveniles.

The Center for Children’s Advocacy and two other national organizations demanded change last year after hearing reports from clients that juveniles and the young adults were getting little education or mental health services as COVID-19 impacted the state.

In June, the state agreed to settlement terms with the advocacy groups rather than face a lawsuit. Under them, the DOC is required to use mitigation strategies such as masking, social distancing and virtual learning to provide the inmates with mostly in-person learning.

The settlement also required the DOC to regularly check the mental health status of the teens and young adults and to provide treatment within a reasonable timeframe. The settlement concluded on Sept. 30. But the center was allowed to stage two virtual visits to draft recommendations for policy changes that would take place after the settlement period, according to documents.

The DOC has not provided the center with written feedback on the implementation of the recommendations which was required by the settlement, Halm said. The short-term recommendations included allowing inmates who were quarantined to have more recreational time outside, having staff do regular symptom checks and weekly COVID-19 tests on inmates, increase vaccination rates and provide more virtual programming.

The advocates’ long-term recommendations included updated policies and literature to reflect developmentally appropriate ways of dealing with youth, responding to youth with disabilities, engaging youth in relationships and providing youth more of a voice in policies.

The settlement wasn’t the first time in recent years that Manson has come under intense scrutiny. The 2019 findings of an investigation by state Child Advocate Sarah Eagan into conditions at the prison prompted federal authorities to investigate as well. Eagan’s second investigation, conducted during the pandemic, revealed that the teens were kept in their cells for extended periods and given generic packets of educational materials to complete in lieu of in-person learning.

The federal Department of Justice issued findings of its months-long investigation into the prison on Dec. 21. The federal agency concluded that the constitutional rights of the juveniles held at Manson were being violated based on first-hand observations, staff and inmate interviews and an extensive review of prison documentation.

In some cases, DOJ investigators said in the report, teens were placed in isolation for days over petty violations of conduct. Teens with disabilities were being denied adequate access to special education and most of the inmates had unmet mental health needs, according to the DOJ report.

“As laid out very clearly in the Department of Justice report, we remain concerned about the cell confinement and access to programming and we remain concerned about access to appropriate mental health programming, especially in light of the pandemic,” Halm said.

The state had 49 days from Dec. 21 to come up with a plan to address concerns outlined in the report or face a possible lawsuit, according to a letter sent to Gov. Ned Lamont.

Lamont’s office did not respond to a request for comment on what steps had been taken since Dec. 21 to satisfy the concerns laid out in the DOJ report.

The DOC was already engaging in many of the recommendations created through the settlement, said DOC spokeswoman Ashley McCarthy in an email Friday.

“We have thoroughly reviewed the recommendations, many of which were already common place prior to the report,” McCarthy said. “We maintain a weekly PCR schedule, enforce universal mask wearing, access to vaccines/boosters, education on the use of PPE, and offer peer support to those with vaccine hesitancy through the use of vaccine ambassadors.”

The agency is focused on providing the juveniles and young adults with a meaningful education, McCarthy said. “In addition to the variety of online training courses, The agency has expanded access to virtual learning through use of our Wi-Fi platform,” she said. “We are going to continue our robust response to this pandemic, while being thoughtful of the impact to our youth.”

At the same time, the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee is poised to review a proposal to move the unsentenced juveniles from Manson to a therapeutic setting, possibly at the former Connecticut Juvenile Training School, in the next few years.

The issue of reforming Manson and how the state deals with teens and young adults charged with adult offenses must be dealt with, said Sen. Gary Winfield, D-New Haven, the co-chair of the Judiciary Committee which oversees legislation regarding the courts and incarceration.

“What you don’t want is to be placed under a consent decree,” Winfield said. “You don’t want to lose your autonomy.”