

State youth lockup earns accreditation

Alexander center passes national group's 3-day inspection

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It has a fairly new name, and now the state's largest youth residential treatment facility has the official endorsement of a national correctional association.

Youth Services Division officials announced Wednesday that the Arkansas Juvenile Assessment and Treatment Center, known colloquially before as "Alexander" in honor of the neighboring Saline County town, has been accredited by the American Correctional Association for the first time.

"It indicates we've made significant progress. It's a foundation to build on," said Kerry Knott, chief operating officer of G4S, a Virginia-based contractor that has operated the 140-bed detention facility for the past year.

A three-day inspection in November examined quality of life, security, food service, medical care and educational programs, according to a news release from the Youth Services Division.

The American Correctional Association, based in Alexandria, Va., inspects prisons and community punishment and youth facilities nationwide. Most state correctional authorities are dues-paying members.

The center's accreditation means all of the state's six juvenile justice facilities now meet national standards, said Julie Munsell, spokesman for the Department of Human Services, the umbrella agency for Youth Services.

Todd Speight, facility administrator, said he views the certification as a symbol that the facility's troubled history is ending.

The center has a history of abuse, mismanagement and educational shortfalls. In 2003, the state and the U.S. Department of Justice signed a court agreement regarding shortcomings in fire prevention, suicide prevention, religious policies and educational programs.

"I see this as turning a corner," Speight said of the accreditation in an interview last week. "We've got a long way to go, but we're making good progress."

The state's prison and parole systems have long been accredited and consistently receive high marks. Some critics, including a national panel on prison conditions, have said the association's standards are too low and focus too much on paperwork.

Knott said the organization's standards provide a good base line for performance.

"We're proud of our folks in Arkansas."