

3 at youth lockup fired after scuffle

BY CHARLIE FRAGO ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

One staff member lost his job for using inappropriate physical force and two others were fired for trying to protect him at the state's largest youth residential treatment facility, officials said Friday.

Details remained sketchy, but Todd Speight, the facility administrator at the Arkansas Juvenile Assessment and Treatment Center near Alexander, said that on Jan. 19, about 8:30 p.m., a male staff member physically restrained a 17-year-old boy in a manner that "was completely inappropriate" in one of the dormitories.

The original report attempted to conceal the nature of the scuffle, resulting in the firing of two additional staff members for misleading investigators, he said.

The Bryant Police Department and the Arkansas State Police are investigating. Bryant police did not return a call for comment late Friday.

The boy had been at the facility for about two months. The three staff members had worked there between five months and a year, Speight said.

Their identities were not released because the investigation is ongoing, he said.

Julie Munsell, spokesman for the Department of Human Resources, which oversees the Division of Youth Services, said the state was pleased with the quick response by G4S, the Virginia-based contractor that runs the center.

"They did act swiftly," Munsell said.

G4S's response also pleased Scott Tanner, a state ombudsman for juvenile justice issues, who said the boy's safety isn't an issue.

At this point, he only seems to have suffered a sore ankle, Tanner said.

"This doesn't seem to be standard operating procedure, but something out of the ordinary," he said.

The scuffle marred the recent good news, announced Wednesday, that the center had been accredited by the American Correctional Association for the first time.

In past years, the center, formerly known as Alexander Juvenile Correctional Facility because of its proximity to the Saline County town of that name, has been troubled with patterns of staff violence and neglect. In 2003, the state and the U.S Department of Justice signed a court agreement to improve shortcomings in fire prevention, suicide prevention, religious policies and educational programs.

The previous contractor Houston-based Cornell Companies Inc. was fired in late 2006. G4S has run the facility for about a year.

Speight said he was disappointed by the firings, but stressed that his employees are hard workers who try to do their "best by the kids."

"These three did something inappropriate and were held accountable," he said.