

Conn. Juvenile Training School recommended for accreditation

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MIDDLETOWN — For the Connecticut Juvenile Training School, getting national accreditation was a deadline-driven assignment — one it has met.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell announced Friday the River Road facility had been recommended for accreditation by the American Correctional Association.

According to a press release from the governor's office, only 55 of 398 secure state-operated facilities in the country have obtained national accreditation.

The training school houses roughly 100 teenage boys who have committed crimes. While their crimes are serious, the school's mission is one of rehabilitation rather than imprisonment.

"In many cases, CJTS is the only option for troubled youth, and their futures depend on the effectiveness of the programs we offer," Rell said.

"While national accreditation is certainly a significant achievement, the true measure of success is the number of young people we help to become productive students on the path to a brighter future," Rell added.

Leo Arnone, director of the Connecticut Bureau of Juvenile Services, said that when he was hired two years ago, he told training school teachers and staff the school was good enough to receive national accreditation.

But, Arnone acknowledged, they were not convinced, so he gave them a two-year deadline.

"I kind of challenged them," he said.

They faced the target head on, and in the end did surprisingly well, Arnone said.

They did so well, in fact, their score was the highest ever achieved by a facility on its first attempt at being accredited, he said.

With a score of 98.7, the school missed very few of the standards it was expected to meet.

"This actually is a tremendous accomplishment, because it's a really rigorous process," Arnone said.

The process included an inspection to verify the school is "really teaching kids," Arnone said.

Inspectors rated it based on 455 separate standards, 33 of which were mandatory.

For three days, three certified auditors from the correctional association spent 16 hours per day in the facility, checking to see if the school meets national standards of excellence.

The inspectors made a point of being there for each of the three daily shifts.

“They’re not looking to see that you meet the minimum standard of the law,” Arnone said. “They’re looking to see that this place stands out as a special place.”

One of the highest and most difficult standards to meet, he said, was a requirement that all staff who work with students must spend 40 hours a year in classroom training, and have 160 hours of orientation when they are hired.

At the Middletown facility, there is a training academy for staff.

While facilities in the Northeast tend to meet that rigorous requirement, most schools in other parts of the nation do not, Arnone said.

Other standards included making certain the school keeps good records on students and performs background checks on staff.

The school is also expected to have a behavioral management program for students and a grievance program that assures students can file complaints outside of the school, not merely with the school superintendent.

“It’s best practice to bring it above the school,” Arnone said.

Arnone said he was pleased with the turnaround the school has experienced in the past two years.

It had a “bad history,” but that has changed, Arnone said.

“They all worked together,” Arnone said of the staff. “These guys pulled it together.”

School Superintendent William Rosenbeck spoke of the daily lives of the boys who are housed at the facility.

Boys wake up and must perform morning chores before going to classes. Chores include making their beds, cleaning the bathrooms and vacuuming or sweeping floors.

“It’s household chores that you would have them do at home that we have mirrored,” Arnone said.

After chores, the boys have breakfast. Some of the boys then attend group sessions, and then, it’s off to class.

Classes at the facility include both academic and vocational subjects such as carpentry, commercial cleaning, graphic arts and auto detailing.

After school, the boys return to their units for group therapy and recreation, such as softball, volleyball, ping pong or simply playing catch.

Those who have proven worthy, based on staff recommendations, are allowed to work at paid jobs.

Paid jobs, which are performed either in the morning or afternoon, include setting up the cafeteria, grounds keeping and filling orders.

Then, when it’s time, all the boys return to their units.

“So it’s a pretty structured day, from 7 [a.m.] to 9 at night,” Arnone said.

Next week, staff will travel to Tennessee, where they must present action plans to the American Correctional Association for five of the standards the school failed to meet. If the plans are acceptable, the school will receive the recommended accreditation.

“There’s still this little hoop to jump through,” Arnone said of the action plans.