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Improvements Ordered in State Youth Prison Clinics

■ Reform: Judge's ruling enforces a 1987 law to ensure health services at CYA medical and psychiatric facilities.

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California's 11 youth prisons must improve medical and psychiatric clinics for 7,500 prisoners within the next two years under a court order issued this week.

San Francisco Superior Court Judge Ronald Evans Quidachay ordered improvements at California Youth Authority clinics, saying he was not convinced the agency would make legally required improvements without "coercion."

Quidachay found in favor of the private, nonprofit Youth Law Center and a UCLA pediatrician who had argued that substandard medical and psychiatric care at the Youth Authority hurts wards and exposes the public to parolees who are more dangerous than when they were locked up.

"There is so much that can be done now with therapy and with medication," said Youth Law Center attorney Sue Burrell. "These kids can really lead normal lives. So this is a good decision for everyone in the community."

The order comes more than a year after the state inspector general's office found substantial evidence of excessive force at the largest of the youth prisons, the Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility in Chino. A Times investigation subsequently showed that many Youth Authority prisons had resorted to a more punitive approach to wards.

Youth Authority officials directed questions about the court ruling to a deputy attorney general, who said he did not know if the agency will appeal. The CYA had argued it is already making improvements and should not be held under the threat of a court order.

The court's action this week enforces a 1987 state law designed to ensure competent and safe inpatient health services to inmates at both the Youth Authority and the adult prisons operated by the California Department of Corrections.

The law requires minimum staffing and training for nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists at the prisons. Those standards were supposed to be met by Jan. 1, 1996.

But the Youth Authority has conceded for several years it didn't meet standards. The agency's management said it has taken more time than expected to hire doctors and nurses and to reconstruct clinics at youth prisons in Stockton, Chino and Ventura.

Quidachay said it appeared the CYA had been focused on licensing clinics at just three youth prisons.

"In other words," Quidachay wrote, "almost five years after the mandatory compliance deadline, [the Youth Authority] has yet to license even one facility and is in the process of licensing only three of the eleven facilities."

Quidachay required that the reforms be in place by Dec. 28, 2001, at the Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility in Chino, the Ventura Youth Correctional Facility and the Northern California Youth Correctional Center in Stockton. The eight other youth prisons must make the improvements by Dec. 27, 2002.