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# State settles Gilliam lawsuit

Deal will ease crowding at youth detention center that ACLU called 'hellhole'

By Bill Scanlon

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Denver runaways and neglected youths no longer will be locked up with violent, sadistic gang members, under terms of a quickly settled lawsuit.

The settlement will mean fewer beatings, fewer sexual assaults, fewer scarred young lives, ecstatic lawyers with the American Civil Liberties Union said.

The ACLU had sued Gilliam Youth Services Center in December, claiming its severe crowding violated the civil rights of the youthful detainees.

The lawyers had expected several years of legal maneuvering. Instead, state officials responded quickly and agreed on a settlement this week:

■ No more than 78 youths will stay at the facility at any one time. It was built for 64, but often held more than 180 a night. Seven would lie shoulder-to-shoulder on mattresses in a 10-by-12

foot room built for one. Youths arrested for speeding or detained for suicide watch slept next to violent repeat offenders.

■ Youths will not stay at Gilliam solely because they were abused or neglected.

■ Youths no longer will go to Gilliam for such minor offenses as traffic tickets or missing a municipal court appearance.

"Gilliam was the closest thing to a hellhole I've seen in 13 years at ACLU," David Miller, legal director for the group's Colorado affiliate, said Thursday.

Young people were locked up with nothing to do, nothing to read, no way to get to the toilet, he said. The walls were covered with feces and urine.

The lawsuit was settled quickly because staff members at Gilliam helped push for the changes, Miller said. He praised Jerald Adamek, director of the state Division of Youth Services, for looking for solutions rather than excuses.

"We could have spent a lot of taxpayer dollars extending this out, or used the same resources for problem-solving," Adamek said. Arizona fought a

similar suit for five years and spent \$7 million, he said.

Statewide, 48% of the youths detained were released within 48 hours, Adamek said. "What was the need for them to be there for the first 48?"

When Gilliam receives the youths, authorities know little except their names and addresses, which are easily falsified, Adamek said. "We have to make a quick assessment. Are they sexual perpetrators? Abused children running away from an unhealthy situation?" Screening will improve, he said.

Said Miller: "The key will be to get the right kids locked up with the right program."

The ACLU represented four youths who said they were sexually assaulted at Gilliam.

"The weak or the small or the vulnerable get picked on," said Sue Burrell, an attorney with the Youth Law Center of San Francisco who helped direct the lawsuit against Gilliam. "This is honestly the first facility I've seen where they keep three kids in the same isolation room, where kids in there for fighting are put together with kids in there for suicide attempts."

A juvenile being held at Gilliam Youth Services Center in Denver writes a letter. This week, the state settled a lawsuit that the American Civil Liberties Union filed on behalf of youths who said they were sexually assaulted while at the center.

Dennis Schroeder / Rocky Mountain News

