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EDITORIALS

CYA incarceration amounts to abuse

By Laura Talkington

I have not been able to be a mother ever since my son went to the California Youth Authority, the state's system of youth prisons. I have spent the last four years watching him appear in the CYA visiting room with cuts, choke marks and bruises.

He has been attacked by other youth or staff more than 40 times. I have seen him lose confidence in himself, become cold and depressed and fearful for his life. And the whole time, I have not been able to do one thing about it. Except lose sleep.

What the CYA calls rehabilitation, the rest of us call tortuous abuse. The CYA is every parent's worst nightmare, and our state's leaders should act now to make sure that no more young people are abused and neglected while under its "care."

As a mother, I call on California to immediately replace the 10 huge CYA prisons with real rehabilitation. Before he was incarcerated, my son was a happy and goofy kid, full of energy. When he was in the first grade, he was classified as having ADHD (a hyperactivity disorder). Doctors placed him on medications, and he entered special education. Later, his condition was diagnosed by a neurologist as petit mal seizures and he was prescribed a medication that made him aggressive. He seemed to begin having difficulty controlling his emotions.

As much as I wanted to help, I could not afford a special treatment program. A police officer told me that if my son were arrested, he would get help in the juvenile justice system.

So the next time my son got aggressive toward me, I called the police. I had him arrested

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twice. I didn't know what else to do. He was placed in a group home that offered no help. When it didn't work, he came back home to live with me.

The next time he was arrested, I urged my son to take responsibility for his actions, and he did. He pleaded guilty and, because he already had a juvenile court record, the judge sent him to the California Youth Authority.

Now, at age 19, my son sits in a cell by himself for 23 hours a day, just wasting away. They call it protective custody. He can't go to church because he is in protective custody, and he can't go to school or vocational classes because he is in protective custody.

Meanwhile, he has been jumped and beaten up four times while he has been in protective custody.

What do they think they are protecting him from? If I beat my kid like he has been beaten in CYA, I would be sitting in prison. If I didn't provide education, food or adequate services, I would be charged with child endangerment.

Yet this is how the state of California treats its troubled youth every day. This is CYA-style

programming.

Over time, my son has become hard and afraid. He doesn't trust anybody anymore. He told me that he is afraid to come home because it is going to take a long time for him to deal with society again. He is afraid he won't know how to act around people anymore.

I am terrified for him and for what his future holds when he gets out. The reality is that when he is released, my son will have to be rehabilitated from the CYA. And it won't be easy. They have been trying to break him for the past four years. A new department head or elimination of the worst CYA practices won't be enough.

The problem is clear: California fulfills its obligation to rehabilitate troubled youth by putting them in large warehouses that are no different from prison. Let's face it, prisons are never going to be able to help our youth. The CYA must transform its whole approach.

We need community-based programs that work with families to help youth. Young people who need to be in secure environments should be placed in small rehabilitation facilities that offer counseling, training and support. These changes can no longer wait.

My son has already lost his own adolescence to the system. As a mother, the only thing I can do is fight for his future and fight to stop this madness. I won't stop organizing until what my son and I have been through never happens again.

Laura Talkington is a member of Families for Books Not Bars, a California network of families whose youth are in the juvenile justice system. She wrote this piece for Pacific News Service.