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Correctional Officers applaud closure of Women's Transitional Housing Program

After wasting close to \$2 million dollars of taxpayers' money for a program that raised serious security issues and was administratively flawed, the state Department of Corrections is shutting down the Women's Transitional Housing Program. The Rhode Island Brotherhood of Correctional Officers, which has opposed the program since its inception in 2002, applauds the decision.

"While the state focuses on budgetary issues, it is clear that this program was expensive and failed to even come close to achieving the goals originally envisioned by Corrections Director A.T. Wall," said Richard Ferruccio, RIBCO president.

"This is a clear example of how the Department of Corrections is wasting taxpayers money, and is incapable of focusing on issues that would improve the corrections system," Ferruccio said. "This program did nothing to reduce the recidivism rate. Most prisoners will return to society, and most, unfortunately, will return to the ACI only after committing another crime.

"When developing programs, it is imperative that the corrections department understands the potential effectiveness of the programs, and the cost to taxpayers," Ferruccio said. "In this instance they were blind to the potential cost and ramifications of a failed program."

In its first year, the program reportedly cost taxpayers more than \$600,000 and in succeeding years the cost was approximately more than \$400,000 a year for as few as six inmates, and at most a dozen.

This money could have been used more effectively to strengthen and fully staff existing programs, or fill budget shortfalls.

The Brotherhood, the union that represents the state's more than 1,200 correctional officers, opposed the program from its outset, objecting that it was being privatized, and that it was open to widespread abuses.

Phoenix House, a national drug abuse counseling agency, has run the program that was first housed in a separate facility off the grounds of the Adult Correctional Institutions, and later as part of the women's prison.

"Phoenix House is well known for its drug abuse treatment, but has little or no experience with the types of offenders that were placed in the Women's Transitional Housing Program, some of whom were convicted of violent crimes," Ferruccio said.

"As a result, there were numerous administrative lapses, contraband found within the unit on several occasions, and escapes," Ferruccio said. "The program was initially developed to transition non-violent inmates back into society, but never did it live up to its expectations."

The Brotherhood had maintained from the outset that the program should be run in-house, using existing staff (counselors and trained correctional officers). If it did,

RIBCO said, the program would have been far less costly, far more effective, and probably would not have been eliminated today.

The Phoenix House program, RIBCO said, is the only security based program run by a private agency within the ACI.

“For overnight duty,” Ferruccio said, “Phoenix House employed non-qualified individuals to guard inmates.”

Correctional officers are sworn peace officers, and receive extensive training before they are assigned to correctional duties. Phoenix House employees do not have similar training, Ferruccio said.

“We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Corrections Department to develop an effective program, using existing staff that will provide a true transition for inmates who could successfully reenter society,” Ferruccio said.