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## Agency News

# Inspected TDCJ facilities meet PREA standards, audits continue

The Prison Rape Elimination Act standards were established to prevent, detect and respond to prison rape pursuant to the PREA Act of 2003. To determine compliance with the PREA standards, all secure confinement facilities operated by or under contract with TDCJ are audited at least once every three years by auditors certified through the U.S. Department of Justice. As of July 2015, approximately one-third of TDCJ's secure facilities have been reviewed and all have met PREA standards.

TDCJ's efforts to prevent the physical and sexual abuse of offenders predate implementation of the PREA standards. By the time Congress passed the PREA legislation in 2003, TDCJ already had a well-established Safe Prisons Program in place. With its longstanding zero-tolerance policy for in-prison sexual abuse, the agency was largely compliant with the new PREA standards which supplement and strengthen TDCJ's ongoing effort to prevent, detect and properly respond to in-prison sex abuse.

A few changes were implemented in light of the PREA standards: for example, in August 2013 all state jail youthful offenders were placed in dedicated housing areas similar to the policy already in place for youthful pris-

on offenders. Also, the Safe Prisons/PREA Management Office began actively seeking partnerships with community-based rape crisis centers to provide offender-victims with support services and counseling, and a "knock and announce" policy requiring all



opposite gender staff to announce their presence in offender housing as they enter the area was implemented in order to limit viewing of an offender in a state of undress.

The audit findings for each facility are posted on the agency website as they become available, with remaining uninspected facilities to be audited over the next two years. The agency anticipates that these facilities will also meet the PREA standards, as Correctional Institutions Division Director Bill Stephens noted, "TDCJ has always taken active and effective measures to enforce its zero-tolerance policy for in-prison sexual assault. The information gained through these new PREA audits has strengthened the agency's Safe

Prisons Program, helping to ensure offender safety and maintaining a safe work environment for staff."

The Texas Board of Criminal Justice's PREA Ombudsman coordinates agency efforts to eliminate sexual abuse and sexual harassment in TDCJ correctional facilities and provides an independent office to receive and respond to allegations of sexual abuse and sexual harassment. PREA Ombudsman Lynne Sharp, who was appointed by the Texas Board of Criminal Justice in November 2014 and reports directly to its chairman, commented on the ongoing auditing process, saying "As the office responsible for monitoring the agency's efforts to eliminate sexual abuse and sexual harassment and ensuring policies and procedures are in compliance with federal and state laws and standards, the PREA audits provide valuable data which highlights the Safe Prisons/PREA Program's most successful efforts while helping the agency plan for continuous improvement."

Both Stephens and Sharp praised TDCJ employees for their ongoing efforts to prevent sexual abuse and other acts of violence within the agency's correctional facilities, and expressed gratitude and appreciation to employees for their public service. ●