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TDCJ coordinates Safe Prisons policy with new PREA standards

With a well-established Safe Prisons Program in place and a longstanding zero-tolerance policy for in-prison sexual abuse, Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) policies and procedures were, with few exceptions, already substantially compliant with recent Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards. The new standards supplement and strengthen TDCJ's continued effort to prevent, detect and effectively respond to in-prison sex abuse.

TDCJ is dedicated to maintaining a safe, professional corrections environment for both staff and offenders, and employees are trained to respond and prevent sexual abuse among offenders. While there have been few notable changes in daily procedures due to PREA, in August 2013 all state jail youthful offenders were placed in dedicated housing areas, similar to the policy TDCJ already had in place for youthful prison offenders. Another initiative related to PREA standards involves the Safe Prisons/PREA Compliance Management Office actively seeking partnerships with community-based rape crisis centers to provide offender-victims with support

services and counseling; the agency will also continue providing Victim Representatives to offenders.



One PREA standard related to cross gender viewing poses a significant operational challenge as it relates to female staff supervising male offenders. While a "knock and announce" policy was implemented requiring all opposite gender staff to announce their presence in offender housing in order to limit viewing of an offender in a state of undress, the agency will continue to seek clarification from the U.S. Department of Justice regarding this issue.

The agency continues making minor revisions to certain PREA-related policies, but

none of the changes are anticipated to have a significant impact on front-line staff. Commenting on the standards, Correctional Institutions Director Bill Stephens noted, "Given that TDCJ's Safe Prisons Program fulfilled the majority of PREA standards, we expected most of them would require minimal changes to our daily operations."

TDCJ PREA Ombudsman Ralph Bales spoke to the Correctional Institutions Division's efforts in response to the national standards, saying, "I commend Mr. Stephens and his staff on their initiatives for implementing the PREA standards. While some of the standards present unique challenges, they have taken significant steps to address the issues. Their efforts are indicative of the commitment the agency has on reducing sexual assaults in prison." ●