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## Agency News

### New telephone hotline helps prevent, resolve visitation problems

One Sunday last month, Brandi Allums, Ombudsman III for the agency's Administrative Review and Risk Management Division, answered an incoming call on the new visitation hotline. The parents of an offender had made the trip from Virginia to visit their incarcerated son at the Luther Unit in Navasota. Because of the great distance they had to travel, they arranged a special visit which would allow them four hours with their son on both Saturday and Sunday. However, they were accompanied by their daughter who had recently turned 18, and she was now required to be on the offender's visitation list in order to see her brother.

While driving to the unit, the family called the weekend hotline to see if what, if anything, could be done. Allums contacted the unit duty warden and, with his assistance, the parents were able to provide additional information and the entire family, including their daughter, were able to visit together on Sunday.

Ms. Allums was available to assist the family from Virginia because TDCJ's Adminis-



trative Review and Risk Management Division's Ombudsman Office has established a telephone hotline, open weekends from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and attended by an ARRM Ombudsman representative who can answer the public's questions about the agency's visitation policies.

Recalling the Virginia family's problem and its resolution, Allums said "Although the offender didn't do what he was supposed to and place his sister on his visitation list, I'm glad we were there to help this family." Regarding the new visitation hotline, she noted that "We do still encourage people to com-

municate with facility administration and we refer them to the duty warden when they have unit-specific questions, but people have been very thankful for the information we're providing and the fact that they can call and ask questions."

Hotline callers can find out where their offender is located, obtain contact information for the unit's family liaison and learn more about the visitation process, to include appealing a visitation denial. Offender family and friends with questions about visitation can speak with an ARRM Ombudsman

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representative by calling (936) 437-4927 or toll free at (844) 476-1289, Saturdays and Sundays during business hours. The agency ombudsman can help resolve many issues before they become more serious problems, but the ombudsman cannot override decisions made by appropriate state and agency authorities.

Staff assigned to TDCJ correctional facilities will continue responding to questions about visitation and will undoubtedly continue receiving most of the visitation-related inquiries. The hotline will be in addition the efforts of unit staff.

Ms. Allums also commented on the overall positive effect of the new hotline, saying “While operating the visitation hotline means an increase in the work done by ombudsman staff, we hope it will assist visitors while at the same time decreasing the time and effort unit staff must spend working to resolve visitation-related problems.”

In an effort to make visitation a better experience for both visitors and staff, TDCJ has also posted the agency’s *Offender Rules and Regulations for Visitation* on the web, along

with other visitation information. Videos on the agency’s Facebook page, its Twitter page and on YouTube explain to families and friends how to best prepare for an offender visit and what to expect when they arrive at a secure TDCJ facility.

TDCJ’s Correctional Institutions Division oversees offender visitation and CID Director Lorie Davis wants to make sure visitation goes smoothly, while maintaining strict security. “Security is our top priority, but rehabilitation and reintegration are important parts of the agency’s mission and visitation helps achieve both these goals,” said Davis. “If visitors take advantage of the information available on the website, and call the unit or the agency’s ombudsman with their questions before leaving home, most problems will be avoided, helping to ensure a successful visit with their offender.”

Texas Board of Criminal Justice Chairman Dale Wainwright commented on the visitation hotline during the October board meeting in Austin, calling it an “excellent idea,” and went on to thank agency staff for supporting offender visitation by family and friends.

“The Correctional Institutions Division has taken several actions in recent years intended to enhance visitation, and all these efforts help contribute to rehabilitation and preparation for reentry into our society,” said Chairman Wainwright. “I want to acknowledge these efforts, express appreciation for everything our staff does to facilitate visits between offenders and their loved ones and encourage our dedicated staff to continue making this a priority. Of course, successful visitation is a two-way street and visitors need to abide by the rules and regulations.”

The ARRM Ombudsman Program office will still be open during regular business hours and can be contacted by phone at (936) 437-4927 or email at [ombudsman@tdcj.texas.gov](mailto:ombudsman@tdcj.texas.gov). ●