

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA  
**Office of the State Auditor**



**Ralph Campbell, Jr.**  
State Auditor

2 S. Salisbury Street, Raleigh, NC  
Mailing Address: 20601 Mail Service Center  
Raleigh, NC 27699-0601  
Telephone: (919) 807-7500  
Fax: (919) 807-7647  
Internet <http://www.ncauditor.net>

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**PRESS RELEASE**

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For additional information contact:

Ralph Campbell, Jr., State Auditor  
(919) 807-7500  
[rcampbel@ncauditor.net](mailto:rcampbel@ncauditor.net)

## **Juvenile Justice system needs more attention, State Auditor Ralph Campbell says in new audit**

RALEIGH \_ North Carolina's juvenile justice system is saddled with woefully outdated buildings that are potentially unsafe for young offenders and staff, as well as education and treatment programs that do not meet the needs of these young people, State Auditor Ralph Campbell said in a performance audit released Wednesday.

Two of the State's five Youth Development Centers, which house juveniles who have been declared delinquent by the courts because of crimes they committed, do not have security fences and the use of electronic security equipment is virtually nonexistent at all of the Centers. Most of the facilities are more than 60 years old, and many campuses include condemned and abandoned buildings that add to security and safety problems.

The Centers operate alternative schools for juvenile offenders, but the required Standard Course of Study is incompatible with their needs, which include a high percentage of students who have special needs. The schools also are under-funded and under-staffed.

While the Department is making some improvements by switching from a correctional to a therapeutic model, treatment programs often are disorganized and lack resources. Major shortcomings included the need for more group treatment, family treatment and increased one-on-one therapy.

"The Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has had a difficult job over the last five years in trying to combine the Juvenile Court system that used to be operated by the Administrative Office of the Courts with the punishment and treatment system that used to be under the Department of Health and Human Services," Campbell said. "It has been a monumental task.

"The task has been made even more difficult because the Department is dealing with young people who have already been through multiple State, county, and community programs before they arrive at the Development Centers," Campbell said.



The Buncombe County legislative delegation initially asked the Office of the State Auditor to conduct an audit of the Swannanoa Youth Development Center near Black Mountain after allegations that juveniles were being abused at the facility. The Auditor's preliminary study showed these issues were being addressed by the legal system. However, the Auditor identified systemic operational questions at all five Youth Development Centers operated by the State.

Auditors found that the Centers generally were in poor condition, were never designed for prison-style security and were potentially unsafe for young offenders and staff members. Renovating the facilities to correct immediate deficiencies, according to experts working with the auditors, would cost about \$44 million, but leave the state with 60-year-old facilities in need of constant maintenance. Building three new centers to replace the five old ones would cost about \$90 million. "From a costs/benefits perspective, it is clear to us that the State should construct new facilities," Campbell stated.

Auditors also found that:

- Staff members were confused over what, when and to whom to report incidents of suspected neglect and abuse.
- Policies and procedures were inconsistent among the five Development Centers.
- Staff training was not consistent or timely.
- Staff turnover that ran as high as 55 percent in some jobs severely impacted the Centers' abilities to deal with juvenile offenders.
- The State's Standard Course of Study does not address the needs of many young offenders, few of whom graduate or receive a GED while in the Centers.
- Communication problems between the Centers and the Central Office hampered a coordinated approach to problems.
- A stable source of funding should be found for the statewide juvenile offender database the Department is developing.

"The State spends \$60,978 every year on each juvenile offender in our Youth Development Centers," Campbell said. "We need to be doing more to help these young people in what may very well be our last chance to reach them. You cannot just write off these juvenile offenders and then be surprised when they turn up as criminals in our neighborhoods and inmates in our adult prison system. The State must address the needs of the system now or face the possibility of court-ordered changes costing millions more than identified in the audit."

The report is available on-line at <http://www.ncauditor.net/EPSSWEB/EDSreportdetail.asp?RepNum=PER-2003-02002>.

Copies of the report may be obtained at the office's web site at [www.ncauditor.net](http://www.ncauditor.net). Printed copies of the report can be obtained by filing a request under the Audits section of the web site or by calling the Office of the State Auditor at 919-807-7500.

