

CYA camp could be budget victim

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Calif. Youth Authority

BONNY DOON — The California Youth Authority camp, a second chance for thousands of youthful offenders since 1947, faces an uncertain future because of the growing state budget deficit.

The Ben Lomond camp, which has a \$2.5 million budget and is one of six youth conservation camps in the state, is under scruti-



11-18-83 Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A California Youth Authority fire crew builds a fence at the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp on Monday.

ny as part of a statewide audit ordered by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Rudolph Luna, superintendent of the Ben Lomond camp, confirmed there is a possibility of a

shutdown because of the deficit and the population decline at the facility on 200 acres on Empire Grade.

See **CYA** on **BACK PAGE**



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A California Youth Authority fire crew takes a break from building fences to pose for a photo on Monday.

CYA

Continued from Page A1

"We have a directive from governor's office to cut our budget by 20 percent," said Luna, 49, who has been with CYA for 27 years. "The director of the Youth Authority is looking at all scenarios, what would have the least impact on wards, staff, community."

The state agency has a budget of about \$416 million.

The Ben Lomond camp has 57 young men, with an average age of 20, and a staff of 28, including the superintendent. In the 1980s, when Luna was a counselor, the camp housed 95 to 100 offenders.

The camp gives young men who have committed crimes a chance to turn their lives around while performing service in the community. They work on projects ranging from park maintenance and brush removal to flood control and fire-fighting, with the Ben Lomond wards contributing more than 150,000 hours in the past year alone.

Most recently, they put out a 5-acre fire near the Rancho del Oso interpretive center before heading out to the blazes near San Diego. Cities and counties that use their services pay them just a dollar a day, a bargain in these days of tight budgets.

"I hope Mr. Schwarzenegger will look at these fire camps as a productive resource," said Luna. "It's money well spent. It gives these young men an opportunity to grow, change, give back and be part of the community. That makes a great impact when they are released."

He said he knew former CYA wards who are working as seasonal firefighters or as parks employees, or attending college.

Bill Ruskin, division chief for the state Department of Forestry, said he is waiting to hear about the future of the camp.

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RUDOLPH LUNA, BEN LOMOND CYA CAMP SUPERINTENDENT

A shutdown "would affect our operations substantially," he said.

The CDF, which owns the property, funds 15 positions at the camp in addition to the CYA staff.

CDF has cut back on the number of fire crews staffed by CYA wards from five to three because of the declining population, but Ruskin said it's important to keep the fire crews in operation.

"The camp serves three counties, and we're the only fire crew resource in a reasonable driving distance," Ruskin said.

Homeowners who live next to the camp property say troubled youth would lose out if the camp is closed.

"Gone will be hope for so many wards of the correctional system. And, for a state price tag of \$2.5 million!" Gerald Pitman wrote in a e-mail to his neighbors. "Why, any \$3 million homes destroyed in the horrific Southland fires would more than pay for the Ben Lomond camp's yearly budget."

Neighbors also worry the camp might be converted to house older wards with longer criminal records and possibly reduce their property values. The Braemoor Road neighborhood association, which consists of about 50 people, will discuss the situation tonight at 7 p.m.

Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, said he, too, is watching the situation.

"The governor just raised the deficit estimate from \$10 billion to \$14 billion, so that will put a lot of pressure on," Laird said.

The per capita cost to house a youth at a CYA facility was \$40,000 in 2001, according to a study of youth corrections in California by the Urban Institute.

In 1996, the state raised the rates for counties to have a youth incarcerated at a CYA facility and then set higher rates for offenders with the least serious crimes. Afterward, the population in CYA facilities shrank 30 percent.

Then in 2000, Proposition 21, the voter initiative to get tough on juvenile crime, made more youthful offenders ineligible for youth camps.

"More youths are tried as adults now, compared to the '80s," Luna said.

After Proposition 21 passed, legislators allocated \$240 million for new community-based programs for juvenile offenders, but those programs had not yet been evaluated when the Urban Institute studied California's youth corrections system last year.

Laird hopes those reports will cross his desk soon. He said a pilot program in Santa Cruz County had proven to be "a tremendous success."

Ironically, juvenile felony arrests dropped 30 percent between 1990 and 2000, from 91,373 to 63,889, yet the overall number of youth in state detention facilities grew 20 percent.

It may be that probation officers are requiring that arrested youths be detained rather than released before a court hearing, according to the Urban Institute. Or it could be that youth are staying longer in juvenile detention facilities while waiting for their case to move through court. The average stay in detention facilities jumped from 22.5 days in 1999 to 27 days in 2000.

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