

REWARD FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR

Lunch out is therapy for teen sex offenders

Saturday, April 21, 2007 3:46 AM

BY KELLY HASSETT

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

CIRCLEVILLE, Ohio -- The boys sat across from each other at the table, second helpings of rice, chicken and sweet and sour sauce piled on their plates.

The pair laughed as someone cracked a joke, and they made a third trip to the buffet for ice cream with sprinkles and chocolate sauce.

If not for the marked van parked outside the restaurant and the guards seated at the table, the boys might have received no more notice than any other friends goofing around at the lunch table.

They were on a supervised outing as part of their treatment program at the Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility, which specializes in treating sex offenders. The boys must meet strict behavior requirements to qualify for privileges such as eating lunch out, having relatives visit or staying up past lights-out to watch a movie.

All state facilities have treatment programs and off-site activities that can include community service, college campus visits and work projects. Circleville is the only juvenile facility that has lunch outings as part of its privilege system. The lunch option started a little more than two years ago, according to spokeswoman Andrea Kruse.

The trips must be approved by the facility superintendent and the central Department of Youth Services office, said Andrea Morbitzer, the department's deputy director for institutions. If the victim objects to the trip, the offender doesn't go. Staff members also get permission from the restaurant.

One of the goals is to develop appropriate social skills. These trips, where each juvenile is supervised by two staff members, show them what normal life is like.

"It gives them something to look forward to," said Stacey Cartee-Ragland, a social worker who works with Devon, 15, and Brendon, 16, who chose to go out for lunch.

When Devon first came to Circleville last April after a rape conviction, he had a problem controlling his anger and talking back to staff members. He made managing his temper a goal in his treatment.



SHARI LEWISDISPATCH

Corrections Officer Jay Conrad supervises a lunch outing for Devon, 15, from the Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility.

"When I first got here, I got six write-ups in one month," he said, speaking, like Brendon, on the department's condition that his last name not be used. "Now, if I'm having a problem with the staff, I'll say, 'No, ma'am,' and walk away, or talk to someone about why I'm angry."

Devon has gone eight months with no discipline citations and is scheduled for release May 21.

Site administrators are aware of some negative remarks from residents about the boys going out in public. But their goal is to rehabilitate them as much as they can before they leave, Cartee-Ragland said.

Circleville resident Summer Caudill, 22, wasn't bothered to learn that juvenile sex offenders can leave the youth prison. Sex offenders are living among all of us anyway, the Columbus State Community College student said.

"You could be sitting next to a stranger that's one. Your next-door neighbor could be one and you would never know it. Obviously, they're trying to change if they're being good," she said of the boys.

But the trips made Michelle Aldenderfer nervous. She said they were an unnecessary security risk.

"I think they should be in until they're supposed to be out," the 23-year-old Circleville resident said. "I still believe they're in there for a reason."

Many sex offenders never developed the social tools necessary to mature in a responsible way, said Marty Traver, a Columbus psychologist who specializes in treating juvenile and adult sex offenders.

"We want them to grow and grow up, and develop coping skills so they don't come out of the treatment program the same as they came in," Traver said.

Brendon, convicted of a gross sexual imposition charge, said he had a difficult time adjusting to life inside the facility during his first four months. There were boys there who wanted to get better, but others who didn't.

He worked on identifying negative situations and people, and how to get away from them. One of the rewards for exemplary behavior is a tan polo shirt to wear instead of the regular facility T-shirts. Brendon tugged on the collar of his polo to show he'd earned one.

He's leaving June 25 after 21 months. "It's kinda nice," he said. "Now I can go back out and do positive things."

khassett@dispatch.com