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## Giving Juveniles Intensive Counseling

By BRANDI GRISSOM

MART — The green-black lines of prison life are scrawled on 16-year-old Luis's face: a cross on his left cheek, three dots arranged in a triangle under his left eye and "cholo" written vertically on his right cheek.

As he sat in a Texas Juvenile Justice Department caseworker's office surrounded by institutional cinder-block walls, Luis stared with resignation at his cuffed hands in his lap. Luis has been in state custody since he was 10 for all but about five months, when he escaped from a juvenile facility and lived on the run. So the restraints did not seem to bother him.

"I heard a G.E.D. opens doors, and a diploma opens way more," he said, almost whispering to his tattooed hands. "I just want to get it, because I'm trying to make my mom proud."

Luis, whose last name is not being used because he is a juvenile, is one of 14 young men in the department's Phoenix Program. Something like a maximum-security prison for adults, the program plucks out the most serious offenders in the juvenile-justice system to undergo intensive counseling.

The consequences for these youths are severe. Failure here means transfer to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice — real prison. Juvenile-justice officials, though, are betting on their success, hoping that reforming the behavior of these few tough young men will help reduce violence in all of the state's problem-plagued facilities.

"They're not bad children," said Bobby Jacobs, a gray-haired, retired public school principal who is one of about two dozen staff members handpicked to work in the program. "They just made bad choices."

The Texas Juvenile Justice Board, which oversees the state's six secure youth offender facilities, approved the Phoenix Program in June after months of reports of escalating violence among young people in the lockups, both against other juveniles and against staff members. Lawmakers — who in 2007 initiated a major overhaul of the juvenile-justice system following revelations that staff members were abusing young people in the facilities — were incensed that troubles had returned.

Lawmakers called for quick action to ensure safety and hold accountable the juveniles who perpetrated assaults and the staff members who allowed the incidents to occur. The

agency's executive director retired in June, and Gov. Rick Perry's go-to problem-solver, Jay Kimbrough, was shuttled in to lead the agency through the crisis.

"Without order and security and safety, you can't have rehabilitation and education," said Mr. Kimbrough, the driving force behind the Phoenix Program.

The agency converted 24 beds in a wing of the McLennan County State Juvenile Correctional Facility to house the young people in the program. It is a stark institution that holds more than 300 juveniles. There are no trees. Metal buildings are surrounded by concertina wire curling high above the perimeter. A single basketball hoop in the corner of the grounds is fenced off for recreation, a faded basketball lodged in the razor wire overhead.

Two thick security doors separate young people in the Phoenix Program from those in the rest of the institution. As heavy doors slam shut behind them, they are greeted by a hand-painted red phoenix rising from flames on the concrete wall. The words "I will rise" are painted above it.

Juveniles are selected for the program only if they have assaulted another juvenile or a staff member and if they have significant time remaining in their sentence. When they are not in their cellblocks, they are handcuffed. If they must venture outside the Phoenix area, their ankles are shackled, too.

Structure and personal attention are the priorities. Nearly every moment of the day is filled with counseling, school time, meals or recreation. The staff-youth ratio is small, one to four, compared with a ratio of one to 12 in the other juvenile facilities.

The walls are decorated with reminders of the central lesson these young men are here to learn: anger management. A diagram of the "anger control cycle" reminds them to sense physical signs of escalation and control their behavior.

Luis arrived at the Phoenix Program about a month ago, after he assaulted a staff member at the Evins Regional Juvenile Center in Edinburg. On his first day, Luis cursed at Kevin Carter, the dorm supervisor, a hulking former police officer who spent 10 years working for a private security firm in Iraq.

"He had low self-esteem, low self-worth," Mr. Carter said. "He didn't have no light at the end of his tunnel."

To Mr. Carter, the success of the Phoenix Program is its simplicity: giving youths the attention and structure they need to focus on making a future for themselves.

"When they first get here, they have no goals," he said. "Give them two weeks, and I guarantee they have a goal."

Luis said that for the first time since he entered the system, he had hope he could go home to his mother and his five siblings and eventually go to college.

Now he recognizes the physical cues that mean his anger is escalating. He has completed his G.E.D., is working on his high school diploma and has received an acceptance letter from South Texas College.

“I feel like I have something to look forward to now,” Luis said.

He hopes to make it home by his mother’s December birthday. But before that, he has another goal — erasing the 10 tattoos he has collected during the years he has been locked up.

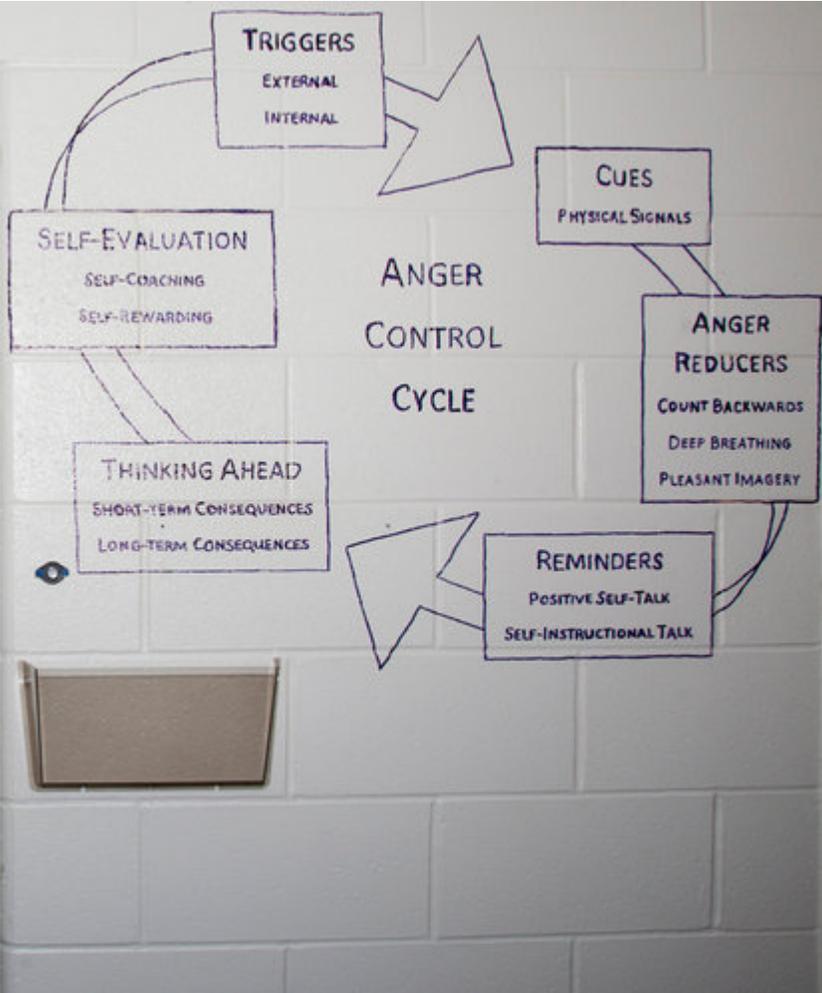
“I don’t want my brothers and sisters looking at me like this,” he said.

Juvenile-justice advocates say the Phoenix Program is an example of the kind of treatment that all 1,200 youth offenders in state facilities need, said Benet Magnuson, a juvenile-justice policy analyst with the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. The system, he said, would not be reformed if only a couple of dozen young people at a time received the programming they needed while the rest remained in dangerous facilities.

For years, advocates have called on lawmakers to shutter large institutions in remote areas and to create small treatment-focused centers close to cities. The Phoenix Program, Mr. Magnuson said, shows that plan could work.

“It’s really the system’s failures that are creating these horrible environments,” Mr. Magnuson said, “and unfortunately it’s these kids’ lives at stake, their futures.”

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A wall inside of a cell at the state juvenile correctional facility in Mart, Texas.