



*Office of the Independent Ombudsman
for the Texas Youth Commission*

CONFIDENTIAL

TO: James Smith and Alan Walters
FROM: Will Harrell, Chief Ombudsman
DATE: June 30, 2008
RE: Long-standing Practice of Youth Extortion at AI Price

I am writing this special memo to alert you to a serious issue we have discovered at AI Price. I would like to keep this memo confidential until we can agree on a way to strategically address this issue while keeping the youth who spoke to me safe.

It appears that there is a systemic problem with youth extorting other youth for food on that campus and the AI Price staff has not taken adequate steps to abate the problem. At every facility I have heard of the occasional situation where a bully youth steals food from weaker youth. But it appears to me that at AI Price there is an entrenched pattern and practice that has been tolerated for years.

I interviewed staff and youth and a practice referred to on that campus for a number of years as "Deebo"¹ is notorious and on-going. "Deebo" is a practice by which under duress a youth will agree to provide another youth with food or canteen items whenever asked.

Every youth I spoke to about this believes it is simply a fact of life at AI Price that you must "fight for what is yours". Youth seem to accept that they have but two choices at AI Price; "fight for your food or go on Deebo". I am certain you share the OIO view that youth in TYC should never have to make that choice.

¹ Wikipedia describes the movie character after whom this practice is nicknamed as follows: Deebo is the primary [antagonist](#) in the *Friday* movie series. He has a menacing appearance, and every character expresses fear of Deebo, probably due to his continual violent and criminal conduct. His character is introduced, photographed from menacing angles and with a theme that sounds threatening and dangerous. While in a series of comedic films, Deebo represents one of the hard truths of living in certain parts of South Central Los Angeles, where even the most law-abiding people are often confronted with dangerous characters and investigating police officers.

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Some youth choose to stay long periods refusing to leave security so that they don't have to subject themselves to this system. One youth I interviewed has been in security for two months because he knows he'll have to fight if he goes to the dorm and that will make him stay longer. As he put it:

"I'm going home and I don't care what they say. You can call me a peon, but I'll be home eating good food while you are still here trying to steal food from your peers...It's never gonna stop so I just stay in security so I don't have to worry about it...At least here I know I'll wake up and my shoes will still be by my bed."²

As it was explained to me, when a new kid shows up on a dorm, others will claim him within moments or days of his arrival. The first to get to the new youth will ask them to "accept". To accept means you will commit to giving up whatever food is asked whenever it is asked of you. If you do not accept, a group of youth will jump you when the opportunity presents itself. That usually occurs on the recreation yard or in the shower area. Also, youth will continually run "dome shots" which is the act of hitting youth in the head with a closed fist when staff can't see as they pass the youth's personal area.

If a youth initially "accepts" he can later get "off Deebo" by fighting. Also, if a youth appears as though he might fight back or he actually does fight back, he may avoid being placed on "Deebo" even if he doesn't win the fight. One youth explained that he was originally placed on "Deebo" on his first dorm and learned from the experience. When he was moved to another dorm, he took the following approach:

"If you come in with your head down and stuff, they are gonna punk you. You gotta mug up some and they might leave you alone".

The youth who has other youth on "Bo" or Deebo" is referred to as a "Bo Master". A "Bo Master" can have a single youth or multiple youth (in some cases as many as three) on "Deebo" or "on-Bo". He can also take another youth "under his wing". Essentially "under the wing" is the same relationship but more of a voluntary arrangement that will provide the weaker youth with certain protection. Youth can also be "slick-bo" which means they do not openly acknowledge being on "Deebo" but will sneak other youth minor food items for protection secretly or "on the down low".

Youth did acknowledge that some staff try to intervene always and other do so when "Austin" is on campus. But since the practice is so entrenched, when staff try to separate "Bo-Masters" from youth on "Deebo", they can still pass food even if it involves three or more youth passing the food under the table.

² This youth explained that if you fight for food, other youth will try to wear you down by stealing your shoes and clothes while you sleep.

Some youth try to help youth on “Deebo”. As one explained:

“I’ll try to help (particular kid on Deebo who I will not name under a promise of anonymity) ‘cause he’s my hommie and I feel bad for him. He’s lost so much weight you can see his spine. I’ll trade up with him. If they take his meat and cake I’ll say hey, ‘you can have half of my meat and my cake if you give me your beans’. They only really take the good stuff.”

Another youth explained to me that:

“The Bo-Master won’t try to starve a kid. They’ll take your food but leave enough for you to get by. He might say I’m taking one of your hamburgers but you can keep your lettuce and take my applesauce.”

At the moment of my interviews, youth believed there was only one dorm at Al Price that didn’t have anyone “on the Bo”. That’s not due to staff interventions they claimed. It’s because there is no one on the dorm, Dorm 4 D, that won’t fight. The worst dorms are 5B and 5D. According to youth, staff on those dorms “don’t even care”. On 3A, there are 3 “Bo-Masters”. One has one youth “on Bo” and one “under his wing”, another has 3 “on Bo” and the third has one youth “on-Bo”.

If a youth is a bona fide member of the dominant gang on a dorm, he might be spared “Deebo” but might have to “ride under somebody’s wing”. While all races are subjected to this, white boys always get selected because they are considered less likely to fight or to get protection.

Youth on “Deebo” must provide food when asked and that happens every day at every meal and snack time. If you are on “Deebo”, you also might have to give up canteen items such as shampoo and toothpaste. Some youth have forfeited their food and canteen under this system for months or years.

Staff acknowledge this has happened at Al Price by that name “for years”. One youth told me when he arrived on a dorm, staff commented “Oh boy, they are gonna get his food”. Youth explained that female staff are more likely to intervene but male staff believe boys need to get tuff and learn to fight.

This is a matter of grave concern to this office. Please let me know when you will be available to discuss a strategy to address this concern that will protect youth and staff who confided in this office on a promise of anonymity.
