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Beatings Claimed At High-End Juvie Camp: Staff at Rancho Valmora Accused of Abusing Students

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May 11, 2008 (Albuquerque Journal - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- -- When his son started dabbling in drugs and alcohol, Corey Manning sent the 14-year-old to Rancho Valmora, hoping the \$6,000-a-month program would help straighten him out.



Instead, the boy was beaten every night for his first two months in the Mora County residential treatment center, according to Manning.

On April 24, a staffer there, Clarence Padilla, was arrested and charged with three counts of child abuse and six counts of contributing to the delinquency of a minor. He was released on bond from the San Miguel County Detention Center and has a preliminary hearing scheduled for May 28 in Mora County Magistrate Court.

The statement of probable cause quoted Dale Parker, Rancho Valmora administrator, as claiming Padilla physically assaulted three students and "also influenced and enforced many more incidents of physical abuse." It names six victims.

Parker informed the New Mexico State Police after residents of Padilla's nine-boy dorm complained of beatings. At times, Padilla allegedly organized some of the bigger residents to attack other boys during the night, often using a sock stuffed with a bar of soap to prevent bruises, according to parents and a treatment center official.

Flora Gallegos, court-appointed attorney for Padilla, did not return a call from the Journal for comment.

The Children, Youth and Families Department, which licenses Rancho Valmora, sent a team last week to investigate health and safety there, spokeswoman Romaine Serna said. Their report is not complete yet, she added.

The more recent alleged incidents, which arrest records indicate occurred over a 10-month period, have left some parents plagued with anger, shock and guilt, asking how a place where they sent their children for help ended up hurting them.

"The guilt that hits you is indescribable," said Manning, a resident of Santa Clara, Calif.

"We entrusted our child to them to provide a safe environment," said George Dombrovski, a Fairfax, Calif., resident. "It's inexcusable to have physical abuse like this ..."

Bill McKay, president of Rancho Valmora and its Texas-based parent corporation, Social Learning Environments, said, "Safety of the kids is our primary concern. All our staff is really upset about this ... We've just beat ourselves to death over this thing."

He said none of the kids had reported physical injuries or sought medical attention for beating-related injuries

throughout that time, and no one had suspected that any of them were being mistreated.

A private, nonprofit treatment center, Rancho Valmora usually has about 76-81 clients and 110-120 staff members, according to McKay. It attracts both boys and girls, ages 12 to 18, from around the country with an approach called "positive peer culture." Residents live and work together in groups of nine, with their peers reinforcing positive values and helping each other understand their problems. The center is about 20 miles northeast of Las Vegas and has been in business about 30 years.

'Pack mentality'

That same peer solidarity, though, may have contributed to the boys' silence. Parents who spoke to the Journal said their sons feared not only that they would be treated even more harshly if they complained, but that the progress and eventual return home of all their dormmates would be delayed.

McKay said it was almost "unbelievable" that the behavior could go undetected for so long. "Kids were available to their therapists individually, a number had trips home to their parents, and nobody ever said a word. You would expect somebody to say, 'Help!' " he said.

"It strikes me what happened is they got kind of a pack mentality about it. Nobody was going to break the chain (of silence)," McKay said.

One boy finally alluded to the incidents during a counseling session, and more details came out under further questioning of all the boys in the group in early April, according to McKay and parents.

"All of them were scared ... because they would be beat up if they said anything," said Dombrovski.

"At one point, they wanted our son Alex to beat up another guy," Dombrovski said. "He refused, so they beat up our son even worse."

Dombrovski said he sent his son to Rancho Valmora when his grades, once straight A's, fell to B's and C's in seventh grade, and the boy was suspended a couple of times for talking back to teachers and "cutting up" in class. He wasn't involved with alcohol or drugs but had started running with the wrong crowd, Dombrovski said.

"We hoped he'd be taught socially responsible behavior," he said of Rancho Valmora, where the boy spent eight months. His parents pulled him out after officials informed him of the abuse allegations last month.

Besides the beatings, Manning said his son was stabbed in the arm by another boy in the center's kitchen. Manning questioned the quality of a program in which abuse could go undetected for so long.

McKay said dorms are supervised by staff teams that work two separate, independent shifts. Usually, two staffers are in the dorms, but one is sometimes pulled out to work with a different group of kids, he said. There were times, then, when Padilla would be the only staffer in his dorm, McKay said.

When they are hired, nonclinical workers get 40 hours of training and work under supervision of another staff member for a while, he said. All people hired undergo criminal background checks, he added.

"We're fighting as much as anybody to find out if there's anything we could have done differently," McKay said.

He said Rancho Valmora has called in a consultant to review its procedures, has increased nighttime staffing and has added clinical staff during the evening hours. In addition, it held an assembly of clients and staffers talking about abusive behavior and the need to immediately report it, McKay said.

One other complaint had been made against the center about a year ago, Serna said, but didn't have details, including whether investigators found a problem there.

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