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Corpus Christi State School investigated after 'fight club' videos of residents found

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AUSTIN – Gov. [Rick Perry](#) suspended admissions to the Corpus Christi State School on Tuesday after police allegations that profoundly disabled residents had been forced into "fight club"-style battles by the employees hired to care for them.

Authorities say vivid video footage captured on [cellphone](#) cameras shows staffers goading young mentally disabled male residents of the institution into physical altercations, then shoving them at each other until fights ensued.

The investigation into the 11 current or former state school employees identified in the videos is continuing, and police say it's not clear whether they were betting on the outcome of fights or uploading them to the Internet. While the video indicates some residents were hurt in the fights, none sustained serious injuries. Officials would not say how many residents were involved.

"Workers were staging fight clubs with the residents for their own entertainment. It's awful abuse – some of the worst I've seen in over 30 years," Corpus Christi police Capt. [Tim Wilson](#) said. "I've heard of isolated incidents before, but what's most appalling is that it's obvious this is organized."

Arrests could come later this week, the local prosecutor said.

State school overhaul

At the governor's direction, officials with the Department of Aging and Disability Services halted new admissions to the Corpus Christi State School on Tuesday and ordered that video cameras quickly be installed at all 13 institutions for the mentally disabled. They also ordered more security officers and overnight supervisors for the facilities, as well as staff to monitor the cameras.

The revelation of the videos, first reported by *The Dallas Morning News*, comes as lawmakers are debating how to overhaul the state schools for the disabled, which the [U.S. Department of Justice](#) accused of systemic abuse and widespread civil rights violations late last year.

On Monday, the Senate unanimously approved a bill to protect state school residents from mistreatment – a measure deemed an emergency by Perry. His chief of staff, Jay Kimbrough, who traveled to Corpus Christi on Tuesday evening, said he planned to stay until safeguards were in place.

"This is exactly why we wanted this to be an emergency priority," Kimbrough said. "There are things we can do immediately. We need to implement as much of this as quickly as possible."

Administrators at the Corpus Christi State School did not return phone calls.

The brawls are captured on repeated videos filmed during 2007 and 2008, along with one that appears to have been taken last month, authorities said. Wilson said they show "staged events" where residents push, kick and punch each other, then have their arms raised in victory when they "win."

The videos, which also have sound, were discovered on a cellphone that was turned in to an off-duty police officer at a local hospital after being found lying in the road. The videos were so clear that investigators were able to determine that they were captured in public "day rooms" at the state school, which is home to 350 residents.

Democratic Rep. Abel Herrero, whose district includes the 100-acre Corpus Christi State School, said he was told that the fight clubs occurred during an overnight shift.

'Disgraceful'

The Corpus Christi allegations are "disgraceful, unacceptable," said Rep. [Patrick Rose](#), a Dripping Springs Democrat who has authored state-school safety legislation and a separate bill to close some of the institutions in favor of community living. "It provides further proof of the fact that we need greater oversight and accountability in our state school settings."

Wilson said police learned of the cellphone last week and opened a joint investigation with the Texas Health and Human Services Commission's inspector general. He declined to say how many residents were involved.

Seven current state school employees in the videos have been put on emergency leave pending the outcome of the investigation. Four other employees identified in the videos no longer work for the state school.

So far, no arrests have been made. Nueces County District Attorney Carlos Valdez said his office is taking the allegations very seriously, and expects police to seek arrest warrants late this week.

The state school safety bill, which still must be approved by the House, would appoint an independent ombudsman to oversee all abuse and neglect investigations in Texas' institutions for the disabled. It would require fingerprinting, background checks and random drug testing of all state school employees, and would install security cameras in all public areas of the facilities – something Kimbrough says might have prevented the Corpus Christi situation.

Rep. Solomon Ortiz Jr., D-Corpus Christi, called the state school case "unbelievable," and said lawmakers have been trying for years to bring attention to the state's dismal care for the disabled.

"We've been sounding the alarms," he said. "Unfortunately, it took a long time to get the leadership of Texas to focus on this issue."

Staff writer Robert T. Garrett contributed to this report.

Corpus Christi State School

Opened: 1970

Employees: 840

Residents: 360, 59 percent of whom are male; 96 percent are between the ages of 18 and 64; the rest are 65 or older.

Disabilities: 64 percent of residents have severe or profound disabilities – the highest level. 23 percent have mild disabilities; 12 percent have moderate disabilities.

Abuse allegations: In fiscal 2008, the school had nearly 1,000 allegations of abuse, neglect or mistreatment. Just 60 were confirmed.

SOURCES: Department of Aging and Disabilities Services, *Dallas Morning News* research