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Director at youth camp fired

State agency says terminated counselors mishandled children's abuse complaints; investigations ongoing.

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SILVER SPRINGS - A program director accused of using older boys to threaten younger ones at a camp for troubled youth was fired Thursday, state officials said Friday.

Frank Penela, a spokesman with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, said the state agency received a letter from Eckerd Youth Alternatives confirming that Eckerd fired Emeka Virgo, a program director at Camp E-Ke-Etu in the Ocala National Forest off East State Road 40. Eckerd, a private company, runs the camp under a contract with the state.

Eckerd officials did not return phone calls Friday.

Virgo joins two camp counselors - Roscoe Watts, 30, and Dana Valentino, 32 - who were also fired Thursday for unspecified violations of company policies.

The actions stem from an incident on April 12. On that day, Valentino and Watts called the Department of Juvenile Justice to report that Virgo had threatened to let some of the older boys at the camp beat up the younger ones if they didn't tell him who stole some "personal hygiene items."

Officials with the DJJ and the Florida Department of Children and Families opened separate investigations into the allegations, and Eckerd officials conducted their own inquiry, which led to this week's terminations.

The counselors who were terminated along with Virgo claim they were unjustly fired for reporting the alleged threats to DJJ and a DCF hot line before reporting it to Eckerd management.

Eckerd officials indicated in a press release on Thursday that the counselors "impeded" the reporting process, without elaborating.

Penela, of DJJ, offered some clarification Friday, saying the counselors were fired because they did not allow the children who were allegedly threatened to call DCF themselves.

"They didn't let the children call the abuse hot line in the first place," Penela said.

The proper procedure is that only the children are supposed to call the abuse hot line, not the counselors, Penela said. The procedure, designed for a child's safety, gives children alleging abuse a way to report allegations directly and not through a third party.

Valentino said he realizes he and Watts may have violated that policy, but they believed it was the only way for the alleged threats to be investigated.

Valentino said Eckerd requires management to be contacted before allowing any child to make an abuse call. He said management then talks to the child, and the abuse call is usually never made.

"We had to make the call or it would have never been investigated," Valentino said. "We did what we felt was the best thing for the kids."

Penela said DJJ's investigation into the threats is continuing. DCF spokeswoman Elizabeth Arenas said that the child welfare agency's investigation is ongoing as well.

DCF is also investigating an incident that allegedly occurred on April 17. In that case, a boy claimed he was punched by a staffer. Other boys gave similar descriptions of the altercation, according to a Marion County Sheriff's Office report.

The camp director, Felix Johnson, reportedly told the deputy, however, that the boy who made the allegation "has a tendency to exaggerate things to gain attention for himself."

The Sheriff's Office is still investigating that allegation, and DJJ and DCF are still looking into both incidences. No official findings or arrests have been made.

"There are two separate cases," Arenas wrote in an e-mail. "Both are still open and ongoing."

