

New claims of abuse at boys camp As law enforcement investigates allegations of abuse, officials at the governor's office sent a team to a North Florida town to ensure the safety of juvenile delinquents.

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GREENVILLE - Three separate state agencies are investigating whether caretakers used banned, excessive and harmful restraints at a camp for delinquent boys, some of whom are mentally retarded or have other special needs.

At least one youth might have suffered a broken collarbone at the Greenville Hills Academy in Greenville just last week, according to records obtained by The Miami Herald. One 16-year-old claimed he was ``choked."

And in another episode, guards also reported using a technique called a wrist lock that was banned two years ago by Anthony Schembri, secretary of the state Department of Juvenile Justice, an agency still reeling from the death of a 14-year-old at another Panhandle facility earlier this year.

The DJJ is investigating Greenville along with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the Department of Children & Families. The agencies declined to give any details other than to confirm the investigation into the academy, which has been the subject of 30 verified abuse or neglect claims made to a state telephone hot line in two years.

"Certainly, the agency takes these allegations very seriously," said DJJ chief of staff Cynthia Lorenzo. ``Our top priority is the safety of youth in our care. Unfortunately, with open investigations we are unable to provide details. Once we do have all of the facts, we will take swift and appropriate action as needed, if any of our staff was involved in any wrongdoing."

Donnie Read, who heads the youth camp's operator, Twin Oaks Juvenile Development, did not return calls from a reporter. Twin Oaks has faced unsustained allegations of abuse at another facility in Apalachicola.

THE ACADEMY'

Simply known as "the Academy" in Greenville, an old railroad stop of a town in Madison County, the complex of brick buildings is topped with bright-blue roofs. It is surrounded by rolling lawns immaculately kept behind barbed wire fencing off a rural road. From a distance, the juveniles, wearing purple shirts and gray pants, look like average kids herded about summer camp by overseers clad in brick-red shirts.

One employee, who wouldn't give his name, said workers have whispered about the probe. And some think it's unfair.

"It's tough managing some of these kids. They can just go wild," the worker said.

Academy officers also filed three incident reports with the juvenile justice agency last week, including the one in which a teen alleged a guard ``choked him."

PREVIOUS PROBLEMS

The camp has a history of complaints from the teens housed there. Youths filed 286 reports of abuse or neglect with the DCF child abuse hot line from September 2004 through June 2006 -- an average of about 13 reports each month, according to DCF abuse records obtained by The Miami Herald. Thirty reports were verified.

The investigation of Greenville Hills comes at a particularly sensitive time for Florida's troubled juvenile justice agency.

A special prosecutor in Tampa is nearing the end of a nearly yearlong investigation into the Jan. 6 death of Martin Lee Anderson, who officials say was asphyxiated by guards restraining him at a Panama City boot camp. An earlier official autopsy concluded that Martin died of natural causes.

BOOT CAMPS CLOSED

Lawmakers passed legislation to curb the use of physical force at five Florida boot camps, resulting in the closure of all but one.

"These are the most vulnerable kids in the system, and they're being abused," state Rep. Gus Barreiro, a Miami Beach Republican who heads a juvenile justice oversight committee, said of the boys housed at the moderate-risk program for "the mentally challenged" in Greenville, a small junction-town between Tallahassee and Jacksonville.

"These are the kids who really need our protection the most," he added. ``But they are being abused the most."

A 2006 inspection of the academy, which Twin Oaks took over in July 2005, found that the camp used a behavior modification program in which youths were rewarded when they exhibited "pro-social" behaviors.

Though state records say Greenville Hills houses boys aged 14-18, the inspection suggested some of the boys are so young they still wet their beds.

"It should be noted that Madison cottage houses the little boys and it appears that there may be a bedwetting problem," the March 2006 report said, noting the cottage ``smelled of urine."

Roy Miller, whose Tallahassee-based Florida Children's Campaign has been a vocal critic of the state's youth corrections effort, called the allegations ``very upsetting."

'The administration has described every abuse incident as `isolated.' They are not isolated. The system is in crisis. We have gone on record as saying these programs cannot guarantee the health and safety of our children," Miller said.

State Rep. Mitch Needelman, a Melbourne Republican who is vice chair of the House Juvenile Justice Committee and sits on a separate DJJ oversight committee, said he was "disappointed"

that DJJ officials failed to alert him to the investigation before a reporter started asking questions.

UNSUSTAINED CLAIMS

In May, DCF's inspector general concluded there was no evidence to sustain allegations that youths at another Twin Oaks-run facility, Apalachicola Forest Youth Camp, "sustained serious injury" as a result of excessive force at that Florida Panhandle camp for youths incompetent to stand trial because of mental illness or disability.

The report said, however, that eight youths had broken bones at the camp between October 2003 and March 2006, including four broken arms and two broken elbows. At least four of the injuries occurred during restraints. Twice, on Feb. 4, 2004 and Sept. 13, 2004, youths fractured elbows during "elbow control" restraints, the report says.

HURT DURING RESTRAINT

One Miami youth, a then-15-year-old with mental retardation who was detained at Apalachicola after being charged with molestation, suffered a spiral fracture to his left arm in December 2005, according to records obtained by The Miami Herald. A report from Tallahassee Memorial Hospital said the injury occurred during a restraint.

In all, DCF received 219 child abuse reports involving the camp since January 2002. Twenty-six of the reports were closed with either verified abuse or some "indicators" of abuse.

"These are somebody's kids," Barreiro said. ``We just can't continue to hurt these kids and expect them to come back to the community and not want to hurt other people."



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