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State conducts two investigations of Mount Bachelor Academy near Prineville

Posted by Michelle Cole, The Oregonian April 06, 2009 19:53PM

SALEM -- The state is investigating reports of child abuse at a private school for troubled teens in central Oregon.

Mount Bachelor Academy near Prineville takes in students from around the country. The academy is licensed by the Oregon Department of Human Services, which confirmed it has launched two concurrent investigations.

The first investigation centers on reported abuse and the second on possible licensing violations. State officials would not discuss details of either investigation Monday.

"We cannot comment on the details or timeline of the assessments while they are ongoing. When they are concluded, there may be information that can be shared," Gene Evans, a department spokesman, said in a written statement.

Former students have posted on MySpace and Facebook numerous complaints about the school, ranging from what they characterized as humiliating group therapy sessions to sleep deprivation. Judson DeVries, who left the school in 2007, told The Oregonian he was forced into "very embarrassing" role-playing games.

Sharon Bitz, executive director of the academy, said the allegations are unfounded.

"This whole thing is difficult and terrible," Bitz said Monday. "That a few people might suggest that we've abused kids who have already suffered so much. For 20 years we've been helping more than 2,000 kids redirect their lives."

Mount Bachelor Academy, in an isolated setting about 30 miles east of Prineville, is licensed as a therapeutic boarding school for up to 125 teens ages 14 to 17 1/2 years old. Tuition is \$6,400 a month, and students typically stay 14 to 16 months.

The state Department of Human Services licenses public and private child-caring agencies to ensure that they meet safety and care standards.

But the department admits its resources are stretched, with just two licensing inspectors to keep track of about 240 child care agencies. A bill is pending in the Oregon House that would allow the state to charge for the licenses and use the money to hire more inspectors.

A state licensing inspector last visited Mount Bachelor Academy in June 2008, when the academy's license was up for renewal. Her report notes that the school had a lot of outdoor activities, a seasoned staff and a program that requires parents to be involved.

But Susan Owren, hired as a part-time van driver last fall, said she quickly heard different stories from the students.

"Humiliation. Food deprivation. Overwork. Taking away school credits as part of the punishment. Dressing up in French maid costumes and doing lap dances as part of a therapeutic session. It goes on and on," she said.

Bitz said allegations of public humiliation, sleep or food deprivation are "absolutely not true."

"We do have a workshop that has role-playing in it," she said. "Those roles are chosen based on the individual therapeutic needs of the students and they're done in a positive way so that they can work through an issue."

Oregonian researcher Lynne Palombo and staff writer Brent Walth contributed to this report.

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