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## Portantino calls for youth boot camp reforms

By Brian Charles, Staff Writer

Posted: 11/30/2011 09:07:35 PM PST

PASADENA - Assemblyman Anthony Portantino, D-Pasadena, on Wednesday called for regulation of California youth boot camps in the wake of videos published on this newspaper's website.

The videos depict what many experts believe to be child abuse at the hands of military-style drill instructors.

Portantino sent a letter to Assembly Public Safety Committee Chairman Tom Ammiano, D-San Francisco, asking for a review and the eventual regulation of the camps.

"The images on the video were alarming," Portantino said. "Now let's figure out what laws were broken, and we as legislators need to figure out what is the appropriate oversight to make sure (children) are not put in harm's way."

In his letter, Portantino makes an unequivocal call for regulations and reform, writing that "there is the potential for victimization of our youth if there is not oversight."

Portantino sent the same letter to the Assembly Human Services Committee.

Ammiano backed Portantino's call for a legislative solution.

"Assemblyman Ammiano will be working with Assemblyman Portantino to see how we can best address the troubling issues that have been raised by (the newspaper's) investigation with regard to the treatment at the boot camps," said Quintin Mecke, Ammiano's spokesman.

No specific timeline has been established for convening the panel. With the Assembly in recess until January, a comprehensive review of teen boot camps and

any regulations that might come of the analysis will have to wait until next year, Mecke said.

The calls for an investigation and regulation of boot camps come more than a month after two videos were published on this newspaper's website. In one of the videos, children are being coerced to drink water to the point of vomiting.

In the second video, a young boy is berated by drill instructors while carrying a tire around his neck. The boy is being told to say he "loves his sergeant" by the instructors, one of whom is believed to be an active-duty Marine.

The Pasadena Police Department launched an investigation into the camps in late October. The Los Angeles County

Department of Children and Family Services has been in contact with police about the findings, Lt. Tracey Ibarra said.

A man resembling Kelvin "Sgt. Mac" McFarland, the owner of Family First Growth Camp in Pasadena, can be seen on both videos.

A voice sounding like that of Keith "Sarge" Gibbs, who operates Sarge's Community Base/Commit II Achieve, can be heard in the first of the two videos.

Both men deny being present when the videos were shot.

The footage was shot two years ago. At the time, McFarland worked for Gibbs. The two parted ways in August 2009.

Portantino's push for boot-camp reforms follows a similar effort by Rep. George Miller, D-Richmond.

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The Bay Area politician's October proposal - his third such attempt to pass federal regulation of the camps - calls for a database and full disclosure of staff credentials at residential programs. However, Miller's proposal doesn't call for oversight of day programs like the one captured in the videos.

Miller's bill does encourage states to create their own oversight and regulation of boot camps, according to a Democratic aide who worked on the Miller proposal and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Unlike Miller's plan, Portantino suggests specific reforms designed to prevent boot camps from employing abusive tactics.

Portantino also wants to be assured that drill instructors are fingerprinted, certified and are mandated to report incidents of child abuse.

The two-term Assembly member also wants to put an end to tactics that landed McFarland in court on kidnapping charges in May.

On May 16, prosecutors say, McFarland handcuffed a truant Pasadena teen and extorted money from her family.

He was arrested May 27 on suspicion of kidnapping, extortion, child abuse, child endangerment, all felonies, as well as misdemeanor unlawful use of a badge.

McFarland is due in court Dec. 15.

At least two other teens have reported that McFarland has handcuffed them, pulled them from their beds and forced them to train all day. Parents connected to the McFarland camp have said handcuffing was a "training technique."

Helen Edwards, who financed McFarland's camp and kept his books, said he handcuffed truant teens in order to "recruit" them, targeting poor Latino students in the process.

Portantino promised that the recent clashes with Democratic leadership in Sacramento won't derail efforts to push through boot-camp reforms.


"I don't think there is a person alive who doesn't think the safety of our children is paramount," he said.

[brian.charles@sgvn.com](mailto:brian.charles@sgvn.com)

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