

## Prank led school to treat two with shock

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### Special ed center duped, report says

By Patricia Wen, Globe Staff | December 18, 2007

Two special education students at the controversial Judge Rotenberg Educational Center in Canton were wrongfully delivered dozens of punishing electrical shocks in August based on a prank phone call from a former student posing as a supervisor, a state investigative report has found.

School staffers contacted state authorities after they realized they had been tricked on Aug. 26 into delivering 77 shocks to one student and 29 shocks to another, according to Cindy Campbell, a spokeswoman for the Department of Early Education and Care, which drafted the report. Both students were part of a Rotenberg-run group home in Stoughton for males under age 22.

The Judge Rotenberg center, which serves about 250 adults and children from across the country, has been under fire for more than two decades for its unorthodox behavior-modification treatments, including electric shock treatments. Its defenders say that the school takes in troubled students, some with self-damaging behavior, who have been rejected by other schools. The center, which Massachusetts officials have tried twice to close because of its treatment methods, focuses on serving people with autism, mental retardation, and emotional problems.

Ernest Corrigan, a spokesman for the Rotenberg center, said the school contacted law enforcement "within hours" after discovering the prank, and that such an incident has never before happened at the school. Corrigan said they have instituted new safeguards to prevent such occurrences. He also said that while the school regrets the incident, the two male students who received the wrongful shocks did not experience any serious physical harm and did not need medical treatment afterwards.

The shock devices, which are strapped to some students' arms, legs, or torsos, deliver two-second electric jolts to the skin. The devices are controlled remotely by teachers.

State officials said the identity of the prankster is known to law enforcement authorities, but they would not release his name publicly and he has not been arrested. The identity of the staffer who was fooled into administering the shocks has also not been released. State officials indicated that some disciplinary action took place, though they would not specify what it was.

According to records from the Disabled Persons Protections Commission hotline phone log, there are repeated complaints about the incident. One entry said "the caller claimed that the shocks were approved, however, they were not."

Based on the prankster's call, one of the students was also wrongfully placed in four-point restraints, limiting mobility of all four limbs.

Critics of the Rotenberg school say the case shows that school officials have failed to live up to their public promises to deliver electric shocks only sparingly and with great oversight.

"This shows a systemic breakdown at the center," said Leo Sarkissian, executive director of ARC of Massachusetts, which represents people with cognitive and developmental disabilities. "It only takes a phone call to instigate shocks to this degree."

Top officials in New York and Washington, D.C., where many of the center's students originate, have called for a stop to the controversial shock treatments at the school.

Yesterday, in a prepared statement, state Senator Brian Joyce called on officials to more strictly limit and regulate the use of shock therapy in the state.

"This incident is horrifying and it would be immoral for the Legislature and the Executive branch not to react strongly and swiftly," Joyce said.

Corrigan, the spokesman for the center, said he is confident the August case will not be repeated, and he hopes this episode "will not be used to overshadow the good work that we do for those who have no where else to go."

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