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Rotenberg records reportedly are seized

The Boston Globe

By Patricia Wen, Globe Staff | May 15, 2008

State Police seized documents late last week from the offices of the Judge Rotenberg Educational Center in Canton that are related to a prank phone call last summer that led two students to wrongfully receive dozens of punishing electrical shocks, according to two people with direct knowledge of the investigation.

The collection of evidence has to do with a yearlong grand jury investigation led by the office of Attorney General Martha Coakley, said Kenneth Mollins, a New York lawyer who has filed several lawsuits against the school and who said he spoke to a representative of Coakley's office about the Rotenberg investigation. Mollins said he was told the grand jury is also examining possible financial improprieties by the school.

The second source, who works for the state and asked to remain nameless because this person is not authorized to speak about grand jury proceedings, said State Police investigators came with a search warrant and left with boxes of documents. The source said the investigation had an ambitious scope and involves multiple government agencies.

Reached last night, Ernest Corrigan, a spokesman for the school, did not confirm that a seizure of documents had occurred last week. He said only that school officials have been cooperative with state and local police ever since they reported the prank phone call to police last summer.

"We've been supportive of the investigation," he said.

A spokesman for Coakley declined to comment, saying the office never confirms or denies an ongoing investigation.

The special-education school, which serves about 250 adults and children from across the country with emotional and behavioral problems, has been the target of numerous government investigations related to its unorthodox behavior-modification methods, including skin-shock treatments to deter inappropriate behavior. Rotenberg officials, who have weathered two attempts by Massachusetts officials to close the center, have defended its treatment methods as effective for some students.

School officials have also said they have instituted numerous safeguards to prevent a repeat of the Aug. 26 incident, in which two emotionally disturbed students wrongfully received dozens of electrical shocks based on instructions from a caller posing as a supervisor. The incident was caught on 24-hour surveillance tapes, which were shown to investigators last summer. The tapes were subsequently destroyed by school officials, even though investigators had instructed them to preserve the tapes.

After hearing about the destruction of the tapes, Senator Brian A. Joyce, a Democrat from Milton who has sought to ban shock therapy at the school, said he intended to ask the attorney general's office to look into the matter.

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