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**State slams Arizona Boys Ranch
Operating license will be yanked today, sources say**
By Rhonda Bodfield and Enric Volante

Arizona Boys Ranch will lose its state operating license today, according to three sources close to the state's investigation.

A state investigation found that Boys Ranch employees abused and neglected a 16-year-old boy before he died March 2 at the Oracle campus, the sources said.

Child Protective Services workers found that more than 10 Boys Ranch employees abused or neglected Nicholas Contreras, according to two sources.

Department of Economic Security officials, who regulate Boys Ranch, are expected to announce this morning their decision not to renew Boys Ranch's license when it expires Tuesday. The CPS conclusions also will be released today.

CPS and DES officials refused to comment yesterday.

Boys Ranch will have 20 days to appeal the licensing decision and will remain open throughout the appeals process.

The state's investigation began after Contreras collapsed and died from an undetected lung infection while being forced to perform physical exercises.

An autopsy determined Contreras, of Sacramento, had about 70 bruises, some of which stemmed from resuscitation efforts.

Since his death, the state has received more than two dozen complaints from other boys at Boys Ranch camps. CPS investigators confirmed abuse occurred in some of those cases, a source said.

The decision marks the state's first aggressive action against Boys Ranch.

In four other major investigations since 1971, the state found abuse or neglect occurred but allowed the 49-year-old facility to remain open.

In three of those cases, the state put Boys Ranch on probation, giving its directors time to address state concerns.

Today's expected decision follows California's July finding of "endemic" abuse at Boys Ranch. California, whose placements made up the bulk of Boys Ranch's enrollment, stopped helping its counties fund the \$45,000 yearly cost per boy on Aug. 1.

Boys Ranch workers who CPS determined abused or neglected Contreras will have 14 days to request an appeal of the findings to an independent review board.

A Boys Ranch official who answered the phone at the facility's Queen Creek headquarters

late yesterday said no one was available to comment.

In the past, Boys Ranch President Bob Thomas has denied Boys Ranch abuses boys and has attributed abuse findings to sloppy investigations by biased CPS workers.

Dwight Busby, a member of the Boys Ranch advisory board, last night said DES is ``making a big mistake. It would be ridiculous, asinine. Why put those kids in prison when they can come out good kids?"

Busby said Boys Ranch regrets Contreraz's death and the violations its own investigation turned up at the Oracle campus, which it closed on July 1.

``But golly, some kids have gone to college out there. . . . You've got kids playing football and basketball when all they knew before was a needle."

Busby said he hopes Boys Ranch appeals, and said he will call Gov. Jane Hull to tell her the state is making a mistake.

For more background information, see a list of related stories from the Star archives about Arizona Boys Ranch.

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