

## House panel wants to crack down on wilderness camps

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**Washington »** A House panel approved a bill Wednesday that would boost federal regulations on residential programs for troubled teens, including the wilderness therapy camps that have thrived in Utah's deserts. The bill is in reaction to a two-year federal audit that found thousands of cases of abuse in residential treatment programs nationwide since the early 1990s, along with misleading marketing practices and uneven state oversight.

"It is past time to bring these programs to a level of basic safety," said Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, D-N.Y., one of the sponsors of the legislation. The House Education and Labor Committee approved the bill on a vote of 32 to 10.

The proposal is almost identical to a bill pushed last year. That version passed the full House by a wide margin, but did not come up for a vote in the Senate. With a new Congress, the legislation had to be reintroduced. Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, a member of the committee, opposed it last year and opposed it again Wednesday.

The legislation would set minimum federal standards prohibiting any punishment that includes denying food, water, clothing, shelter or medical care. It also would limit the ability to forcibly restrain children.

The federal government would take the lead in auditing these programs for three years, while states would draft requirements that at least are as strong as the new federal minimums.

Then the states would take over, though feds would still conduct inspections every few years.

The legislation would also create a toll-free abuse hot line and a Web site that would allow parents to review substantiated abuse claims.

Bishop said he opposed the bill because Democrats showed "a Congress-knows-better attitude" by rejecting two amendments. One would allow parents to OK any new medications, including contraceptives. The other, which Bishop sponsored, would limit the abuse and neglect cases publicized on the new Web site to those proven in court.

The bill now would allow state officials to determine which claims are substantiated.

The audit, conducted by the Government Accountability Office, found that more than half the states reported at least one death in these programs. Utah was not one of them, though the audit indicated that one-fourth of all wilderness therapy camps are headquartered in the state. Utah also reported no abuse cases in 2005.

But investigators didn't have to go back too far to find a teen who died in Utah's rugged landscapes.

In July 2002, Ian August died due to heat exhaustion while hiking as part of the Skyline Journey program, which has since been closed. Charges were filed against the owner, but were later dismissed.

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