

Troubled US teens suffer abuse, neglect at 'boot camps'

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WASHINGTON (AFP) — Troubled American teens have been abused and neglected at the high-discipline, "tough love" programs which are supposed to help them, and have sometimes paid with their lives, according to a report by the US Congress.

The report presented to a committee of US lawmakers Wednesday spoke of "thousands of allegations of abuse, some of which involved death, at residential treatment programs across the country and in American-owned and operated facilities abroad between 1990 and 2007.

"Today we will hear stories of children denied access to bathrooms and forced to defecate on themselves; children forced to eat dirt or their own vomit; children paired with so-called buddies whose job was to abuse them," Democratic lawmaker George Miller said at the presentation of the report on residential treatment centers, which are designed to help troubled youths.

The report, drawn up by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), was released as a Florida court began hearing the case of the beating death -- caught on video tape -- of 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson at a program for young offenders.

"During 2005 alone, 33 states reported 1,619 staff members involved in incidents of abuse in residential programs," it said.

Bob Bacon's son, Aaron, died in 1994 while taking part in a so-called wilderness therapy program in Utah for troubled teens.

"Aaron's journal contained no poetry but recorded in his own words an unbelievable account of torture, abuse and neglect," Bacon told lawmakers and a handful of parents of victims who attended the hearing.

Bacon said his son spent "14 of his 20 days on the trail without any food whatsoever, while being forced to hike eight to 10 miles (13-16 kilometers) a day.

"On the days he did have food, it consisted of undercooked lentils, lizards, scorpions and trail mix," Bacon said.

Sixteen-year-old Paul Lewis hanged himself while attending a "therapeutic wilderness program" in West Virginia.

"While he was in the program, Ryan was 5 feet one inch (1.6 meters) and weighed 90 pounds (41 kilograms). He was forced to carry a makeshift backpack with approximately 60 pounds (27 kilograms) of gear," his father, Paul Lewis, told the hearing.

Cynthia Harvey's 15-year-old daughter, Erica, died of heat stroke and dehydration at another camp.

"We will be haunted as long as we live by Erica's cry of, 'Please, Daddy, don't make me go,'" her distraught mother said.

Residential treatment programs and facilities began springing up in the United States in the early 1990s.

Not governed by federal law, the programs often come in the shape of wilderness therapy -- where participants are in an outdoor, survival setting, away from the distractions of modern life and forced to focus on themselves -- or "boot camps" with strict, military-style discipline.

"Many of the programs are intended to provide a less restrictive alternative to incarceration or hospitalization for youth who may require intervention to address emotional or behavioral challenges," the GAO report said.

But youths who attended the camps said they were "worse than jail," clinical child psychologist Allison Pinto told the hearing.

"We did an online survey and collected 700 responses in six months. The survey revealed a highly disturbing phenomenon," Pinto, who coordinates the Alliance for the Safe, Therapeutic and Appropriate use of Residential Treatment (A START), said.

"The comments of the youths included: 'It was a terrible place. I would hope no one would ever have to go to a place like that. It's worse than jail.'"

"The treatment is a violation of human rights: youths were deprived of food, sleep, shelter. There were incidents of physical and sexual abuse," she said.

The report was commissioned by the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor after allegations of abusive or unprofessional behavior at the camps, sometimes resulting in a teenager's death, were received by legal authorities or posted on the Internet.

It blamed many of the deaths at the camps on inept program managers and untrained staff, and accused some of the camps of taking "tough love" to unacceptable extremes.

One program fed teens "an apple for breakfast, a carrot for lunch, and a bowl of beans for dinner while requiring extensive physical activity in harsh conditions," the report said.

Others led ill-equipped hikes in unfamiliar territory, drawing fire from the GAO for "reckless or negligent operating practices".