

## Teen accuses Evins staff of abuse

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EDINBURG — More allegations of abuse have surfaced at the Evins Regional Juvenile Facility, less than a month after administrators there pledged to reform policies on restraining inmates.

A former teenage resident claims a staff member at the troubled detention center threw him to the ground and violently attacked him after a raucous group therapy session in July 2007.

The incident left 15-year-old Robert Romero Jr. with a dislocated hip, fractured pelvis and a ruptured artery in his thigh, according to a federal lawsuit filed this week against Evins and the Texas Youth Commission, the state agency that oversees the detention center.

“It takes quite a lot to make a grown man cry,” his father, Robert Romero Sr., said. “But after I saw my son, I broke down in tears.”

The accusations come within three weeks of a proposed settlement agreement between the U.S. Department of Justice and the Texas Youth Commission that would end a civil rights lawsuit filed on behalf of Evins inmates.

The facility has come under intense scrutiny in the past two years after several inmates accused guards of using overly violent means to restrain them.

Romero’s attorney, Christopher J. Gale, sees his client’s cases as proof that Evins’ troubles are far from over.

“There has been a lot of concern there about the use of force,” he said. “We have to remember that these are just kids.”

### ‘EXCRUCIATING PAIN’

According to the suit, Romero Jr. entered the Evins facility in March 2007 on a robbery charge, but it didn’t take long for him to run into trouble with staff members.

On July 17, the teen says, a counselor accused him of disrupting a mandatory meeting at which several inmates were present.

Romero, who claims he obeyed the staff member’s orders to settle down, was ordered out of the room.

The Evins employee then allegedly followed him out into a hallway, slammed him onto the ground and bent his legs into his back.

Romero “felt excruciating pain run through his leg accompanied by a loud popping noise,” the lawsuit states.

The incident left the teenager hospitalized and in need of continued medical care, said his mother, Graciela Garza Romero, who lives in Rockport, outside Corpus Christi. For several days afterward, Romero Jr. sat in a separated security room with undiagnosed internal injuries.

“At the time, they kept telling me he was OK,” she said. “He wasn’t OK. He was sitting alone for a week with a fractured pelvis.”

## **HISTORY OF VIOLENCE**

The TYC became the target last year of widespread allegations of physical and sexual abuse at several of its 24 youth detention centers and halfway homes across the state.

But the earliest reports of systemic mistreatment came from Evins.

Three out of every 10 inmates at the facility reported some form of abuse in 2005, according to a Valley Freedom Newspapers investigation.

That same year, three inmates filed suit against the TYC claiming abuse similar to the allegations in Romero Jr.’s case. One of the teens reported that guards used his body as a pole to open swinging metal doors, ground his face onto a stretch of pavement and then kicked him.

The incident left him without vision in one of his eyes, according to a lawsuit that was settled in a private agreement in November before it could go to trial.

Representatives from the Texas attorney general’s office, which investigated claims of TYC abuse at the time, said they were not involved in any ongoing court action against the staff member named in Romero Jr.’s case.

A TYC spokesman had no official comment on the case

## **‘IT WOULD SCARE ANY MOTHER’**

Graciela Romero was aware of Evins’ troubled reputation when her son first landed in the facility. And as new cases of abuse seemed to emerge at TYC facilities every day, she worried for her son’s safety.

“There was so much going on at the time it scared me,” she said. “It would scare any mother.”

But when she learned that her own son may have become the victim of excessive force, she requested that he be transferred to another unit.

Romero Jr. has since been moved to a lower-security TYC halfway house in Corpus Christi. He is scheduled to be released from custody in March.

The family is asking for unnamed monetary damages from Evins, the TYC, Hidalgo County and the security guard, all of which have been named as defendants in the lawsuit. So far, no hearing dates have been set for the case.

But the Romeros just hope the court will send a message to the TYC and the staff member who they believe hurt their son.

“We’re not in this for the money,” Romero Sr. said. “I just don’t want him to keep on and maybe hurt another kid. It may be worse next time.”

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