

The Washington Post

Greg Kutz: Uncovering child abuse and neglect at residential, public and private schools

The Partnership for Public Service

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In Arizona, a teen with asthma and complaining of chest pains was forced by counselors at a residential boot camp to do pushups and carry cinder blocks for not having completed an assignment. The youngster subsequently died, with an autopsy finding more than 70 physical injuries.

In West Virginia, a four-year-old autistic girl with cerebral palsy was tied to a chair, badly bruised and traumatized. In Utah, a 16-year-old boy in a wilderness therapy program collapsed and died after counselors ignored signs of physical distress for three weeks, including severe weight loss, severe abdominal pain and loss of bodily functions.

These shocking and heartbreaking stories are among thousands of cases chronicled by Gregory Kutz, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) managing director, who led a nationwide investigation that documented widespread abuse, torture, neglect and death of troubled and disabled children in residential programs and in public and private schools across the United States.

Dedicated to curbing these abhorrent abuses, Kutz' investigation has led to legislation approved by the House of Representatives and pending in the Senate that establishes new federal health and safety standards to

protect teenagers in residential programs.

The probe also prompted legislation approved by the House of Representatives earlier this year and pending in the Senate that is designed to prevent and reduce harmful seclusion and restraint of children in all schools. In addition, the inquiry provoked reactions from the Department of Education and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

The results of the investigation were disclosed at three dramatic hearings before the House Education and Labor Committee in 2007, 2008 and 2009. They included tales of severe beatings of children by residential program staff; the withholding of essential food, water, clothing, shelter and medical care; abusive seclusion and restraint of children with disabilities; and deceptive

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marketing by programs targeting vulnerable parents of troubled children.

The inquiry highlighted the lack of federal laws to protect young people in residential programs, and exposed the weak and inconsistent laws and oversight by states regarding issues of seclusion and physical restraint.

"His findings have brought attention to rampant abuses and attracted the attention of the press and Congress," said Sally Anne Harper, GAO's chief administrative officer. "He has taken this work personally, and saw it as his duty to look out for vulnerable children."

Education Secretary Arne Duncan said he was "deeply troubled" by the disclosures, and he sent a strong letter to all state chief school officers requesting they review policies and guidelines regarding the use of restraints and seclusion in schools to ensure every student is safe and protected.

The FTC responded with a guide for parents to use before enrolling their children in residential troubled teen programs. The FTC warned that these programs, such as those for drug and alcohol treatment, confidence building, military-style boot camps and psychological counseling, are not regulated by the federal government, and many are not subject to state licensing or monitoring.

As father to a five-year-old girl, Kutz said he found the use of seclusion and restraint of young, developmentally challenged children especially revolting.

"Doing this kind of work, speaking to parents of children who died in these facilities and reviewing autopsy reports, is never an easy task, but it's all the more heartbreaking when the surviving victims are some of the most vulnerable members of our society who are unable to speak for themselves," he said.

The findings resulted from extensive outreach to state and local law enforcement authorities, parents, attorneys and advocacy groups across the country to document cases going back almost two decades.

There were undercover calls to residential programs where GAO investigators, including Kutz, posed as vulnerable parents looking for

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programs to help their troubled children. The GAO also conducted extensive analysis of federal and state regulations and court records.

Harper of the GAO said the child abuse investigation exemplifies the type of work Kutz has done throughout his career. "He personally conducts investigations which shine a light on places that are dark," Harper said.

This article was jointly prepared by the Partnership for Public Service, a group seeking to enhance the performance of the federal government, and . Visit for more about the organization's work to recognize the men and women who serve our nation.

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