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## Miss. juvenile detention case near end

*The Associated Press*

A preliminary agreement has been reached in a federal lawsuit that claims youth were abused at a south Mississippi juvenile detention center and forced to live in squalid conditions.

The lawsuit, filed April 20 in U.S. District Court in Gulfport over conditions at the Harrison County Juvenile Detention Center, claimed youngsters were subjected to physical and emotional abuse and forced to live in crowded and filthy cells.

Mississippi Security Police Inc., a private company based in Pascagoula that runs the facility, denied the allegations. However, the company agreed there were ways to improve the lives of troubled youth at the facility, said company vice president Tony Best.

Mississippi Security Police was not named as a defendant in the lawsuit, which was filed by Mississippi Protection and Advocacy Inc., with lawyers from the Mississippi Youth Justice Project, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The suit named Harrison County as a defendant, and said the county pays Mississippi Security Police \$1.6 million to house offenders.

The allegations of abuse and insect-infested cells were premature and made before youth advocates were granted access to tour the facility, Best said in a telephone interview Friday.

"We both have the same goals in mind, that's doing what's best for the children," he said.

Attorneys were granted access to the facility in a court order June 11.

When asked if the conditions turned out to be as bad as youth had claimed, Sheila A. Bedi, an attorney for the children, said: "We feel confident that if this agreement is fully implemented it will remedy the most disturbing allegations in this complaint."

Mississippi Security Police's leadership has shown a "very strong commitment to protecting Harrison County's children" in the future, she said.

Among the terms of the agreement, Mississippi Security Police will ensure a certain staff-to-youth ratio, use restraints only when there's a threat of bodily harm and limit the use of long confinements.

If the facility reaches 90 percent of its capacity for more than four days, Mississippi Security Police will try to find "less restrictive alternatives" for some of the nonviolent offenders, the agreement says.

The Mississippi Youth Justice Project also plans to work with youth court and other officials to identify alternative treatment for less troubled, nonviolent offenders. That would ease the potential for overcrowding at the facility and better serve Harrison County's youth, Bedi said.

Bedi said the agreement is signed and could be filed with the court by late Friday. She hopes to reach a more comprehensive settlement that could eventually end the lawsuit during talks scheduled the week of July 13.

