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Republicans Sink Bill to Prevent Abuse in Teen Behavior Schools

As Congress fights this week over taxes, the deficit commission and finally ending "don't ask, don't tell" another issue involving the health and safety of tens of thousands of American teens has flown under the radar. Last year, with broad bipartisan support, the US House of Representatives passed HR 911, the Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act, which would provide some minimum standards for the multimillion dollar teen behavior modification industry. The industry, which has largely escaped widespread public scrutiny, preys upon the fears of parents through deceptive marketing tactics and outright lies. Promising parents to straighten out their "troubled teens" (who usually aren't all that troubled) this industry locks away teens in abusive camps subjecting them to months or years of forced labor, humiliating degradation and unthinkable physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Tens of thousands of teens are suffering in these programs right now and dozens have been killed, but after weeks of promising negotiations in the Senate to move forward with some kind of protection for these youth, Senate Republicans abruptly closed negotiations and killed any hope this year of stopping this rampant child abuse.

I never suspected that stopping child abuse was a partisan issue. Surely Senate Republicans and Democrats may have different ideas on how best to stop child abuse. Surely different provisions of the bill could be tweaked to appeal to both sides. In fact, during the behind-the-scenes negotiations this month the two sides were doing just that -- figuring out how to get everyone on board with this essential bill to stop child abuse. But these negotiations have ended and Senate Republicans have simply said no.

No doubt you are wondering what controversial provisions of this bill the Senate Republicans simply couldn't accept. Here are a few bullet points taken right from the congressional GOP's website:

H.R. 911 directs the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families of the Department of Health and Human Service to require each location of a covered program to meet minimum standards, within 180 days of enactment the Act.

Note: Under this provision, "covered program" refers to residential programs for children with emotional, behavioral, substance abuse or mental health problems.

These minimum standards include:

- The prohibition of child abuse and neglect;
- The prohibition of disciplinary techniques involving the withholding of food, water, clothing, shelter or necessary medical care;
- The protection of children from physical restraints and seclusion;
- The prohibition of abuse designed to humiliate or degrade a child;
- Reasonable access to outside communications;
- Each staff member, including volunteers, is required to become familiar with what constitutes child abuse and neglect according to State law;
- Full disclosure, in writing, of staff qualifications and their roles and responsibilities;
- Each staff member must submit to a criminal history check, including a name-based search of the National Sex Offender Registry;
- Policies and procedures for the provision of emergency medical care; and
- Procedures for notifying parents or legal guardians of any investigation of child abuse and neglect, or violation of health and safety standards.

By saying no to this bill Senate Republicans are saying yes to the deplorable treatment and abuse that occurs in these "torture schools" for teens. By saying no, they have just said yes to child abuse and neglect in residential programs. They have said yes to withholding food, water, clothing, shelter and necessary medical care from American teenagers. They have said yes to physical restraints and seclusion. They have said yes to abuse designed to humiliate or degrade a child. They don't even want programs to verify whether or not their staff are sex offenders!

I, and other members of the National Youth Rights Association, met with Sen. Tom Harkin who said, "There are standards for nursing homes and child care facilities, there ought to be standards for these programs." He is right. Regulations exist protecting children every other kind of institution that governs their lives. Considering how few personal rights young people have and the degree to which they are kept powerless over their own lives, such regulations are necessary to ensure this lack of power isn't taken advantage of. It is perhaps no surprise then that the industry with the least regulation and oversight does the most to take advantage of young people. The "troubled teen industry" has abused hundreds of thousands of teens and children over the last 30 years and any hope that they will suddenly begin to self-regulate is both foolish and dangerous.

The stories of abuse at these facilities are shocking. Jon Martin-Crawford, of CAFETY, testified before the House Education and Labor Committee that kids at his program, the Family Foundation School, were restrained in duct tape and blankets, punched and beaten repeatedly, and left there for hours on end without breaks for restrooms. Alicia Hamilton, while at Hephzibah House at age 12, was beaten till her body was covered in large welts and blood. If she cried or whimpered from the punishment she was hit more. Other kids experienced extreme emotional abuse, months of being screamed at and degraded and insulted by others in the program. Teens are routinely imprisoned in these camps for years at a time with no due process, and years afterward suffer flashbacks to the trauma they suffered.

Unfortunately these survivors are the lucky ones. Dozens of their peers never make it home. The

Government Accountability Office report entitled "Selected Cases of Death, Abuse and Deceptive Marketing in Residential Programs" provides case studies of several deaths that occurred in these programs. A second report by the GAO on the teen behavior modification industry can be seen [here](#).

Yet with a mountain of evidence and a great deal of common sense showing that these programs are abusive and need to be shut down -- or at the very least actually regulated and monitored by some responsible authority, the Senate GOP refuses to act. This is deplorable.

Hope is not lost however. No one wants to see such horrific child abuse continue. Lawmakers are busy and surely the Republican Senators who are holding up this bill don't fully understand the magnitude of the problem this country faces, nor do they realize the necessity for the Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act. Stopping child abuse is certainly not a partisan issue. In this time of partisan warfare on the Hill, this is absolutely an issue both sides can come together on in agreement. So the National Youth Rights Association is calling upon all Americans, regardless of your party affiliation to sign this petition urging the Senate to take fast action on the Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act and protect young people.

Sign that petition, tell your friends, tell everyone you know that a life saving measure very well may be defeated by Senate Republicans if we don't act. Over the last few days millions of Americans have changed their Facebook pictures in opposition to child abuse. Thinking about child abuse is good, taking action to stop it is even better. Sign this petition to do something real to stop child abuse.

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