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Teen freed from lockup amid sex abuse claims

BY MAR CABRA

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Lawyers for a 15-year-old boy who was held 10 months in a state youth lockup claimed Friday the teen had been sexually abused in a laundry room by a staff member, who molested him yet again at a dental office when his pleas for help were ignored by administrators.

The teen's claims are contained in a 28-page class-action civil rights lawsuit filed in Fort Lauderdale federal court Friday.

A few hours later, the teen, identified in court records only as D.B., was released from state custody by Broward Juvenile Judge Elijah Williams.

The lawsuit, initiated by an affiliate of the Montgomery, Ala.-based Southern Poverty Law Center, claims that children held at the Thompson Academy youth corrections program in Pembroke Pines "endured horrific physical and sexual abuse by staff at the facility and were intimidated by staff from reporting the abuses."

"Even if the child is not an angel, no child should be subjected to abuse at the hands of a state [agency]," said Gordon Weekes, Broward's chief assistant public defender.

Jesse Williams, senior vice president of Youth Services International, which operates Thompson Academy, told The Miami Herald that the allegations are being investigated by law enforcement and state social service agencies. He called the claims "unsubstantiated and unsustained."

SUICIDE ATTEMPT

David J. Utter, one of the attorneys who filed the complaint, said the lawsuit would not have been filed "if we did not believe that D.B. had been sexually assaulted." Utter said D.B. tried to commit suicide three times while at the facility by drinking bleach and attempting to hang himself.

D.B.'s mother, who did not want to be identified to protect her son's privacy, said program administrators never notified her of her son's alleged assaults, nor of his attempted suicides.

"Before my son got into the program he had never tried to hurt himself," she said.

"Although he was supposed to be getting rehabilitation, his life has only gotten worse."

Thompson Academy is not the first program that contracts with the Department of Juvenile Justice to face allegations of physical abuse. In April 2006, state lawmakers shut down

several military-style boot camps after a 14-year-old Panama City youth, Martin Lee Anderson, died following a particularly aggressive physical restraint.

Lawyers with the law center said they interviewed about 20 kids from Thompson Academy, and all of them raised concerns about the facility, including allegations that they were forced to go hungry.

One youth, identified as D.L., claimed in the suit that a Thompson Academy staff member slammed his head into a concrete wall, twisted his arms behind his back and banged his head into a metal door during a restraint. Unlike D.B., D.L. remains at the lockup.

Attorneys with the law center also contend that Thompson Academy staff members tried to cover up the abuse by preventing detainees from visiting lawyers or speaking with them by telephone.

NO MORE CONTACT

Williams, the Youth Services International executive, said the staff members identified by the law center as abusers no longer have contact with youth sent to the company's programs by the state -- and will be fired if they are found to have harmed any children.

``We take every step and measure to make sure the kids are protected," Williams added.

On Friday, Judge Williams released D.B. to his 36-year-old mother. He declined to say whether the youth's claims are well-founded, saying the determination is for state law enforcement or child welfare administrators to make.

``We're going to celebrate the whole weekend," said the boy's mother, who said Thursday was D.B.'s 15th birthday. ``I've been waiting for this day."