

July 12, 2007

Lawsuit Filed Over Treatment of Girls at State Reform School in Mississippi

By ADAM NOSSITER

Troubled adolescent girls at the Columbia Training School, a state-run reform school, were shackled for 12 hours a day and forced to eat and to use the bathroom while wearing the shackles, according to a federal lawsuit filed here Wednesday by five of the girls against Mississippi officials, including Gov. Haley Barbour.

Another girl at the school was sexually assaulted by a guard, and three of the shackled girls were able to cut themselves even though they had been placed on suicide watch, according to the suit, filed in Federal District Court by the Mississippi Youth Justice Project.

Most of the 30-odd girls at the school are being held for nonviolent offenses like drug possession or shoplifting, and most suffer from a mental disorder.

Reports of what the lawsuit calls "widespread abuse" at the Columbia school and a similar institution for boys, the Oakley school, are not new. In 1977 a federal judge curtailed the use of isolation cells and pushed for the hiring of doctors; five years ago the State Legislature found numerous inadequacies; and four years ago the Justice Department discovered that young offenders were being hogtied, shackled, choked and beaten. The department sued Mississippi over those and other abuses, and a settlement was reached in 2005.

But in a low-tax, low-spending state where, advocates say, care for troubled young offenders is a low public priority, abuses have persisted. At a legislative hearing last month there was testimony about guards' making sexual propositions to the girls, shackling and other problems. Meanwhile, a recent report by a Justice Department official monitoring the settlement found persistent deficiencies, particularly in protecting the children from harm.

"When you look at adults who commit crimes or children who get into trouble, there's not a lot of public pressure on politicians to do the right thing," said Robert McDuff, a veteran Mississippi civil rights lawyer who helped draft the lawsuit. "And unfortunately the current administration has not paid the proper attention to correcting these problems."

The chairman of the juvenile justice committee in the State House, Representative George Flaggs Jr., a Vicksburg Democrat, said of the abuses mentioned in Wednesday's lawsuit: "It's indefensible, it's embarrassing to the state of Mississippi, and it's unnecessary. Shackles should never be used unless they are being transported. It's clearly stupidity."

Six workers at the school were suspended by the Department of Human Services two weeks ago, and raises have been announced for workers at the schools, though the lowest-paid will still receive only slightly under \$19,000.

The department declined to comment on the lawsuit.

The lawsuit, filed by a branch of the Southern Poverty Law Center of Montgomery, Ala., paints a grim picture of teenage girls subjected to systematic harsh treatment at the school, a sprawling facility in Columbia, in the state's southern pinelands, where inmates are confined for as long as several months. And despite the troubled mental state of the girls, the school provided virtually nothing in the way of counseling.

The girls were shackled because they were suspected of wanting to run away, according to the lawsuit, which said there was "absolutely no security or other penological or rehabilitative justification for shackling of the girls."

Still, they were made to wear the restraints going to and from sleeping quarters, the cafeteria and the medical clinic. Sometimes, the staff did not properly lock the shackles, thus chafing the girls' ankles as they walked and causing them "excruciating pain," the suit says. Girls were also subjected to sleep deprivation when the lights were left on in their sleeping quarters, lawyers said.

One girl was sexually abused by a guard who grabbed her inside the disciplinary cell in which she had been placed. When she struggled, he left, according to the suit. The girl, already traumatized by sexual abuse at the hands of her father, never received any counseling after the guard's assault, despite complaining about it.

Another troubled girl, put on suicide watch, was placed alone in a cell "for over 14 hours," and was not given mental health counseling, the suit said. Unmonitored, she was able to carve the words "hate me" into her forearm. Another girl on suicide watch, similarly neglected, was able to slice her wrists with glass, it said.

"The lawsuit indicates that the model of juvenile justice in Mississippi is a failed one, and these resources are much better spent on programs proven to turn lives around," said Sheila Bedi, a lawyer with the Youth Justice Project.

Mississippi's plans for dealing with troubled youth have "proven themselves failures over and over," Ms. Bedi said, adding, "State officials have been deliberately indifferent to the rights of these children."