

Teens Claim Abuse at Prison

by John Allard, The State
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Eight boys formerly jailed at a privately run juvenile prison are claiming that employees assaulted them when they were hogtied.

The boys claim in separate lawsuits that prison employees squeezed their crotches when the boys' hands and feet were bound behind their backs.

The teenagers claim Corrections Corporation of America employees often choked and hogtied boys at the prison off Farrow Road near Interstate 20. The boys also allege workers improperly used pepper spray on them.

"CCA's conduct in authorizing and condoning the practices... is extreme and outrageous and exceeds all possible bounds of decency in a civilized society," Gaston Fairey, the boys' attorney, wrote in the lawsuits.

The lawsuits, filed in federal court in Columbia, don't identify the boys because they are juveniles. They are similar to one that another boy filed in February.

James Cooper, a lawyer who represents CCA, said he couldn't discuss the lawsuits because he hasn't seen them. The firm denied any wrongdoing in response to the lawsuit that was filed in February.

Five of the eight teenagers are home. Two are at state mental hospitals. One remains in prison.

The youths and their parents declined to comment, Fairey said.

After allegations of misconduct, Gov. David Beasley ended the state's contract with CCA. On July 1, 1997, the Department of Juvenile Justice started running the prison, now called the Northeast Center.

Treatment has improved at the prison since the Juvenile Justice Department started running it, Fairey said.

"I'm still struggling with the Juvenile Justice Department about programming and other issues," Fairey said. "But the agency doesn't authorize the techniques CCA taught its employees to control juveniles. It fires employees who are abusive."

Several reports sent to Beasley showed CCA employees too frequently resorted to physical force to control juveniles.

Beasley and lawmakers were upset with CCA's management of the prison almost from the time it opened in July 1996. There were also two group escapes.

The governor also received reports that CCA employees lacked the training or experience to do a good job. CCA provided one week of training for officers who worked at the Farrow Road prison.

Correctional officers employed by the Juvenile Justice Department must complete a five-week basic training class. They are supposed to use force as a last resort.

The state and CCA are at odds over money the private prison company believes South Carolina owes it.

Last week, CCA asked the state's chief procurement officer to review its request for a payment of up to \$12 million from the state.

CCA wants compensation for money it spent to renovate the Farrow Road prison and to build three wilderness camps statewide.

John Allard covers state prisons and corrections issues.