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Commentary: Behavior Modification Facilities Are Not Safe

By Robert Reynolds
Tuesday May 16, 2006

The nation was recently shocked by the beating death of 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson in a Florida boot camp. Sadly, this is not the first case of a death occurring in a "behavior modification" facility; in fact, there have been three deaths in such facilities throughout the country since December 2005. Although the camp that Anderson attended has recently been shut down, many similar ones are still in operation throughout the country.

You've probably seen people from these programs on daytime TV. They're the "drill sergeants" that yell at kids until they break down (at least that's all they do on live TV). They say that their version of "tough love" is completely safe, and effectively treats problems such as defiance and drug use. The evidence shows otherwise.

One hundred and nineteen deaths have been reported due to treatment received in these facilities. Many are caused by asphyxiation due to the use of restraints. These are not typical handcuff restraints, as you may be thinking. Some of these cases have involved arms being twisted behind the back to the point of breaking and staff members lying or sitting on top of the child for upwards of 30 minutes. Restraints are commonly used to punish such horrendous offenses as talking out of turn and making eye contact with another student. It should be noted that restraints have caused at least 30 of the 119 deaths.

First-hand accounts from students and former staff members of these facilities are equally disturbing. Their statements and experiences make these facilities seem less like boot camps and more like Abu Ghraib. Stress positions, beatings, hog-tying, humiliation (including making students soil themselves), and sexual abuse are among the charges.

Fox News ran a three-part expose last year on one of the main groups of facilities that operates under the name of WWASPS, or World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools. The former president of WWASPS admitted under oath, in WWASPS v. PURE, that abuse "probably" happens. In the same court case the current president of WWASPS, Ken Kay, stated that most allegations of abuse are not investigated. He further explained that because these children are not the typical "college prep type," sexual relations between staff members and students may not constitute abuse. For those who doubt this, the court transcripts are available at www.isaccorp.org. Much of the other information given above can also be verified at that site, as well as at www.caica.org.

With all of this information readily available, one would think that the government would be investigating these programs or would have legislation regulating them. However, despite requests from Congressman George Miller (D-California), the Justice Department has refused to investigate. Senate and Congressional hearings have not been held, either. How can steroid abuse in professional baseball warrant a Senate hearing while the deaths of 119 children and the abuse of many others is completely ignored?

These facilities are not safe, plain and simple. Until there is some form of oversight, the abuses will continue, and the death toll will rise. If you know of a child enrolled at one of these facilities, do everything in your power to get them out. Their life may depend on your action.

Robert Reynolds is the president of the National Youth Rights Association (www.youthrights.org).

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