



The Birmingham News

Removing boys from that Blount County program where abuse is alleged was the right move at the right time.

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THE ISSUE: Removing boys from that Blount County program after allegations of abuse was the right move at the right time.

Torture. Beatings. Severe abuse.

These are serious accusations, to be sure. They are the kind we have made against our enemies during war. The kind of accusations made against us, where Abu Ghraib and Gitmo are concerned.

Except these accusations are being made right in this area, against a faith-based program that cares for troubled boys in Blount County. While the investigation continues and those who represent the Reclamation Ranch Ministries' Lighthouse Academy strongly deny the accusations, calling them false and misleading, the state Department of Human Resources did what it has to do when responding to serious charges: It removed the 11 juveniles who had been at the home and, after a court hearing last week, returned them to their parents and guardians while the investigation into the Lighthouse Academy continues.

That action is appropriate because the safety of the boys enrolled in the program, located near the west Blount County town of Empire, must be the top concern. If the boys being cared for were, in fact, being abused, those who run the program must be ready to accept responsibility and the consequences.

The Alabama Bureau of Investigation and Blount County sheriff's deputies removed the boys from the home on Nov. 22 after a complaint of "severe abuse, beating and torture" of a 17-year-old at the academy, according to the Blount County district attorney's office.

"The search by law enforcement and the questioning of involved minors yielded corroboration of the original allegations and evidence of other instances of mistreatment," said Blount County District Attorney Tommy Rountree last week. One report said investigators seized handcuffs and shackles from the facility.

The evidence is going to a grand jury.

Reclamation Ranch Ministries, according to its Web site, operates two facilities in the Empire area for boys and girls ages 12-17 and one program for men ages 18-35. The girls home, called Rachel Academy, is in Walker County about a mile and a half from the Blount County boys' ranch. The accusations of abuse do not involve Rachel Academy.

Reclamation Ranch Ministries denied the accusations on its Web site. And some of the former academy residents had positive comments about their time in the program, described as "a minimum one-year program that incorporates Bible teaching, character training and respect for the family."

While we hope the accusations against Reclamation Ranch Ministries truly are a misunderstanding and are not true, whether true or not, the state acted appropriately in removing the boys once the charges were found credible. And if the charges are true, thank goodness for the quick action, which may have saved these boys from serious injury or worse.

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