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Federal panel hears of sexual abuse TN juvenile detention facility

By BART JANSEN • Gannett Washington Bureau • June 4, 2010

WASHINGTON — Tennessee officials who were "flabbergasted" at the level of sexual abuse reported at Woodland Hills Youth Development Center told a federal panel Friday the steps they've taken to reduce staff misconduct.

But Steven Hornsby, deputy commissioner of the Department of Children's Services, also questioned the survey results that found one in four youths at Woodland reported sexual abuse by staffers, which ranked the facility among the worst in the country.

Hornsby, a former trial lawyer and judge, said Woodland Hills routinely gets top grades from outside auditors. He questioned the lack of corroboration for children anonymously reporting abuse when counselors, teachers and guards hadn't reported anything.

"I don't want to sound defensive," he told the Justice Department's Review Panel on Prison Rape, which held a hearing on the survey results. "There were no students -- zero reports -- of student sexual victimization during the time period that information was requested" during the survey.

The January results of the National Survey of Youth in Custody surprised Hornsby because a national accreditation panel gave Woodland Hills a nearly perfect score -- penalizing only the ventilation system and the size of cells -- and state-level investigators found no widespread abuse. Another accreditation review is scheduled in August.

"We were shocked," Hornsby said. "I think my word was just flabbergasted."

But Allen Beck, a Justice Department statistician and an author of the survey, defended the results and said authorities discounted suspicious claims. Of the 55 youths interviewed at Woodland Hills, that left at least 14 reported abuse by staffers.

"That's a really high number," Beck said.

Allegations of sexual abuse have persisted for years at Woodland Hills.

A former staffer, Ricky Moreland, reported a pattern of female staffers having sex with students from 1990 to 2003 in a letter to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that the Tennessean newspaper obtained.

In one case, a female guard married a male student after he left the facility, which the newspaper confirmed through the marriage certificate. In another case, a female guard was reportedly impregnated by a former student.

More recently, Luana Settle, who worked for two years in the kitchen at Woodland Hills, was investigated five times and failed a lie-detector test before she resigned in 2007, according to state records.

But a 17-year-old boy got chlamydia after having sex with Settle in a kitchen closet in 2006 and she eventually pleaded guilty to statutory rape, serving two years in state prison.

In the last six months, two boys claimed they were victims of inappropriate touching during personal searches and a Woodland Hills teaching assistant allegedly started an inappropriate relationship with a former student now held at a state-run halfway house.

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One of the touching cases was categorized as unfounded and the two other cases are under investigation.

The federal hearing didn't deal with specific cases. But state officials described the steps they've taken in recent years, such as posting 40 colorful posters around the facility with a phone number for reporting abuse, extending staff training from three weeks to nine weeks and installing surveillance cameras throughout the facility.

"This really has been a valuable learning experience," said Albert Dawson, Woodland Hills' superintendent.

One of the federal panel members, Sharon English, the retired deputy director of the California Youth Authority, asked how Dawson prevents "strong" relationships between students and staffers from becoming "wrong."

"I'm not sure what strong means and when strong flips over to inappropriate," English said.

Staffers meeting with students outside regular hours, giving them gifts or calling after hours each send up red flags, Dawson said. Supervisors monitor relationships and caution staffers, rather than reprimand them, if a situation seems too close.

"You don't want to destroy something that might have a positive effect," Dawson said.

The federal survey and the hearing panel were created under the 2003 Prison Rape Elimination act. The hearing followed the survey that 12 percent of youths in detention facilities are sexually victimized by other juveniles or staffers, based on interviews from June 2008 and April 2009.

Woodland Hills ranked with facilities in Maryland, North Carolina and Virginia as having the highest reported sexual abuse in the country.

"I said, 'Oh my God, what have we missed,'" said Carla Aaron, executive director of DCS's division of child safety, which investigates claims of abuse. "We need to interview these boys."

Her agency and the Tennessee Commission on

Children and Youth, an independent agency charged with ensuring the safety of children, conducted their own followup survey by interviewing 41 boys at Woodland Hills.

While the results are preliminary, the state's followup survey found 93 percent knew their rights and how to report abuse and 86 percent of the children felt safe in the facility.

"They knew how to report any type of threat or intimidation," said Patricia Wade, the lead reviewer who worked on the survey for the commission.

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