PUBLIC HEALTH, WELFARE & SAFETY

Exhibit No. 2

Date 2-9-07

Bill No. SB 288

Northwest Regional Chapter of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs.

Friday, February 9, 2007

WHEREAS:

The programs in Montana that are members of the National Association of Therapeutic School and Programs have formed the Northwest Regional Chapter of NATSAP.

As members of NATSAP, we subscribe to and support the NATSAP Code of Ethics and Standards of Best Practice. We are united in our desire for a bill to pass the legislature requiring and granting the Montana Board of Private Alternative Adolescent Residential or Outdoor Programs (PAARP), the authority to establish, implement and oversee licensure for programs in Montana.

We have come together on this issue for the following reasons:

1) We believe that it is in the best interest of the children and families that we serve that there be a reasonable licensure process established in Montana to provide quality assurance and oversight of our programs. We also believe that licensure is in the best interest of programs in Montana.

2) Programs operating in Montana provide important services to students and families. The programs represent significant sources of revenue, jobs and taxes in a clean non-extractive industry that contributes to the local economy and quality of life in local communities.

3) There is increasing national focus on the importance of licensure that is reflected in both the public media and in recent bills submitted to congress. The primary thrust of this focus is that unlicensed programs are seen as substandard, lower quality and unsafe for children. In addition programs that are unlicensed are characterized as wanting to avoid oversight and licensure. This has a negative chilling effect on all programs in Montana regardless of their quality.

4) Because of the increased focus on licensure, programs operating in Montana are at a competitive disadvantage with other programs in other states such as Utah that have well developed licensure process.

5) This is a non-partisan issue, there is general agreement on the need for licensure, time is of the essence and it is important to develop licensure in Montana now. We supported the development of the Montana Board of PAARP two years ago with the understanding that licensure would be forth coming. We appreciate and applaud the work of the Board and their thoroughness in examining this issue. However, the time for talk and study is over. Now we need to take action and implement a licensure process.

6) The licensure process and requirements need to be sensitive to the needs of the children served as well as sensitive to the needs of the programs that serve these children. It needs to be fair and well thought out. The licensure process is best addressed by the existing State Board of PAARP under the Department of Labor and Industry as established by the last Legislature.

7) We feel that it is very important to provide oversight with a board that is truly independent of being controlled by programs. At the same time we believe that the state board should be sensitive and responsive to the needs and concerns of programs in Montana. For these reasons we feel that the board should be expanded to include seven individuals rather than five. However we oppose any more than seven as we feel that a greater number will be too cumbersome, potentially ineffective and too expensive.

Lynda Carpenter
862-7871

8) Three of the board members should continue to be chosen from the pool of executive leaders of programs in Montana, with the remaining four chosen at large by the Governor, with no more than one of them being a government official.

In closing, our industry needs a licensing board to establish standards of care and practice to ensure the safety and well being of the adolescents and parents using such programs. The board should be charged with developing a licensure process and standards in a way that provides public safe guards, and also protects the resourceful development of alternative care that has been a hallmark of these programs.

THEREFORE:

It is the desire of a the NATSAP programs now operating in Montana for the Legislature to pass a bill charging the State Board with the responsibility of setting and monitoring licensing standards for private alternative adolescent residential care programs. This board will remain under the administrative authority of the Department of Commerce and have a similar role and relationship as other existing professional boards such as the, the Board of Psychologists, The Board of Social Workers, or the Board of Physicians. This board will develop and implement a licensure process in the next two years

Thank you for your consideration.

At Some Youth 'Treatment' Facilities, 'Tough Love' Takes Brutal Forms

by Michelle Chen

Children's advocates are taking aim at privately run programs that treat kids with a range of problems as delinquents who need to be straightened out by force.

Nov. 21, 2005 – If this was therapy, it sure didn't feel like it. From September to January, Claire Kent spent her days digging up tree stumps from a barren field, her mind and body battered by the elements. The work was part of her "treatment" for the drinking and sex that had landed her at a boarding school for "troubled teens."

In the Montana woods, Kent and a couple dozen other adolescent girls had been committed by their families to a disciplinary program that included chopping wood, exercising to the point of physical breakdown, and being regularly bullied and insulted by "counselors" – all in the name of what the private treatment industry calls "emotional growth."

"It was just based on, 'How badly can I scare you?'," said Kent, now in her late twenties and still suffering from anxiety that she attributes to her experience. During her two-year stay, she said, "they gave me the reality that life was just completely unfair and was going to keep being that way."

The facility where Kent was held, the Mission Mountain School, is still in business today. Though staff declined repeated requests for comment, the recent explosion of hundreds of other so-called "private residential treatment facilities" speaks to the growing popularity of the "tough love" approach to "reforming" youth. Behavioral health experts estimate that the industry deals with roughly 10,000 to 14,000 children and teens, charging typical tuition rates of tens of thousands of dollars per year. The patrons are anxious parents hoping for a solution to issues ranging from attention deficit disorder to drug abuse. Worth approximately $1 billion, emotional growth programs thrive on the promise of turning "bad" kids "good."

Private residential treatment facilities take various forms, from camp lodges in Montana to militaristic disciplinary compounds on foreign territory.

Though some mental health professionals believe residential treatment could be helpful in extreme circumstances, horrific experiences reported by young people confined to unregulated facilities prompt questions about who is caring for them, and who is held accountable when care becomes abuse?

"It appears that there's a growth industry of very harsh kinds of programs that are using confrontational therapies, incredibly strict discipline, the kind of exhaust-them-until-they-break-down kind of [practices]," said Charles Huffine, an adolescent psychiatrist with the advocacy coalition Alliance for the Safe, Therapeutic and Appropriate use of Residential Treatment. "These are practices that are much more akin to certain kinds of harsh prison conditions than they are to anything that would be remotely considered therapy."

Private residential treatment facilities take various forms, from camp lodges in Montana to militaristic disciplinary compounds on foreign territory. The main defining features are physically isolated campuses and in many areas, virtually no formal government oversight.

Seared in his memory, and reported by other former detainees, are the frequent screams of boys and girls who endured special disciplinary sessions in isolation at the hands of staff.

Growing alongside the teen "help" industry is the political and legal backlash against tactics that some view as cruel and bizarre. In recent years, several facilities have closed following abuse investigations. Activists are also promoting the End Institutionalized Abuse Against Children Act, which would fund state and local monitoring of treatment facilities, along with the Keeping Families Together Act, which would enhance access to community-based behavioral healthcare. Yet youth advocates and former program participants caution that legislative action would merely dent the complex culture surrounding institutions that aim to "fix" youth.

At especially harsh facilities, said Huffine, once adolescents are inside, "as human beings they have no rights. They cannot stand up and say, I have been slimed, I have been harmed, I have been hurt, I want out of this."

Rules and Consequences

One night, a few months before his high school graduation, Charles King was awakened by strangers, handcuffed, and told he was being taken somewhere to get help. When his escorts released him, he found himself in another country, locked in a concrete compound, watching a dismal parade of shaved-headed youngsters marching silently in a line.

King's new home was Tranquility Bay in Jamaica, part of a network of behavior modification facilities tied to the Utah-based corporation World Wide Association Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASPS).

"You weren't allowed to talk, you couldn't call home to your family," recalled King, now in his mid-twenties. "You weren't allowed to do anything, basically, without permission – and if you did, there were consequences."

The pressure to confess, Kent said, was compounded by the stress of obeying seemingly arbitrary rules.

"Consequences" is the term WWASPS facilities prefer instead of "punishment." Under a point system, participants theoretically earn privileges for following rules and suffer consequences for breaking them: completing intensive chores or sitting obediently through self-help "emotional growth" videos might after a few months earn a kid the prerogative to call home.

But King recalls the consequences more clearly than the rewards: spending days on end in detention, known as "observation placement," lying rigid with his face plastered to the floor, under the surveillance of domineering staff. Seared in his memory, and reported by other former detainees, are the frequent screams of boys and girls who endured special disciplinary sessions in isolation at the hands of staff.

"They thought they were going to die; that's what it sounded like to me," King said.

In California, families of former participants have sued WWASPS and several affiliated schools, claiming abuse and inhumane living conditions. Though children's advocates consider WWASPS schools an extreme example of behavior modification programming, the company's promises of bringing "structure" to kids' lives are common throughout the industry.

Dismissing the allegations of mistreatment as groundless, Director Jay Kay told *The NewStandard* that Tranquility Bay "has assisted kids and families in ways hard to put into words." He continued, "We are about character-building, emotional growth, therapy and family values."

WWASPS President Ken Kay, Jay's father, argued that compared to psychiatric treatment or the prison system, the WWASPS approach is in fact a more humane way to modify destructive behavior in young people.

"It's extremely necessary in society," he told *TNS*, "to have something between running rampant with negative behavior and juvenile detention or mental lockdown."

On the issue of human rights, the elder Kay remarked, "Children have the right to expect that when they're getting so far out of line, someone is going to rein them in a little bit."

A Tight Leash

According to critics in the mental health community, even programs that are not outright physically abusive can still be degrading and traumatic, especially for vulnerable adolescents already struggling with emotional issues.

Intensive "wilderness" activities, for instance, are billed as a method of building maturity, but some former program participants say that they serve mainly to break spirits.

"It was really about establishing authority and control," said Kathryn Whitehead, who entered Mission Mountain after a suicide attempt at age 13. The work and exercise programs, she said, aim to exhaust girls until they "can't hold anything in. So, you purge yourself of whatever demons you're carrying."

Claire Kent said her stump-digging assignment was the penalty for not giving the staff a detailed enough account of her sexual history – a requirement for all participants.

Between labor sessions in the woods, Kent described navigating a constrained social system in which girls were forced to "disclose" all secrets. Staff routinely rebutted confessions with accusations of lying or withholding information, she said, so girls wound up spinning made-up stories of abuse or family dysfunction just to gain a counselor's approval.

The pressure to confess, Kent said, was compounded by the stress of obeying seemingly arbitrary rules. When the staff deemed excessive toilet use a punishable offense, for example, she recalled that girls resorted to soiling themselves to avoid going to the bathroom.

"They used fear to change us," she said. "We were not changing for positive reasons."

But Larry Stednitz, an educational consultant who refers parents to youth facilities and has visited Mission Mountain, defended work regimens as a useful way of keeping kids occupied. "If you don't structure things pretty tightly," he said, "you're going to have problems."

Indeed, some former participants feel that this structure benefited them in the long run. In an essay featured on the strugglingteens.com website, which is run by educational consultants, former Mission Mountain participant Kristie Vollar used language similar to Whitehead's to argue that the intense stress helps girls by making them "physically, mentally and emotionally worn out until there isn't enough energy left to hide 'what's really going on'."

Such positive perceptions do not surprise Kent; she takes them as evidence that the program succeeds in inducing total, self-obliterating submission. "The other 30 girls there, you know, were believing in the program," she recalled. "You eventually believed in it, too: that you were this rotten, filthy, horrible kid, and that Mission Mountain saved your life."

Credibility Gap

An undercurrent of distrust runs through the controversy over these authoritarian adolescent management facilities. Program administrators suggest that troubled youth cannot be trusted to act in their personal best interest and insist that complaints of mistreatment should be viewed with similar skepticism.

Ken Kay countered abuse allegations by pointing to the results of parent questionnaires administered by WWASPS. According to parents, kids have what he calls "a huge history of manipulation and misrepresenting the truth." These youth, he concluded, "have a bad habit of lying to their parents, their school people, to their friends... And so I don't expect that, you know, they are going to stop lying."

For 18-year-old Sean Hellinger, who languished for about two years in residential treatment – first at a Montana-based WWASPS institution called Spring Creek Lodge and later a similar program in Utah– advocating for himself led to a catch-22. Each complaint about severe and humiliating treatment by the Spring Creek staff, he recalled, would run up against the presumption of "manipulation." It was futile to protest to his parents, he said, because staff would inevitably convince them he was lying to get out of the facility.

"You can't talk to the outside world, and when you can, it's all censored," he said. "And your parents don't believe you.... I was ignored, betrayed."

Parental Misguidance

Advocates calling for tighter regulation of residential facilities say that some programs bank on desperation and lure parents with deceptive advertising. Critics of the industry say consultants and recruiters market programs to families by rapidly "diagnosing" serious emotional problems in children and sometimes offering help in securing a fast tuition loan. Meanwhile, parents are left unaware that the program is not clinically licensed, or lacks an adequate trained staff.

Nicki Bush, a psychology graduate student who interned at a rural residential treatment facility, said administrators convinced parents to sink their savings into behavioral treatment that their children supposedly needed. While many children did have serious psychological disorders, she observed it was not uncommon for kids to end up at the facility "because they were having sex with some 20-year-old guy, and [the parents] found a joint, or something like that."

Cristine Gomez, one of the plaintiffs in the WWASPS lawsuit, said aggressive marketing persuaded her to send her son, who was having trouble in school and suffering from attention deficit disorder, first to Spring Creek Lodge and eventually to Tranquility Bay. She told *TNS*, "I took for granted that they were

licensed and regulated... I assumed that somebody was keeping track of basic indications of the safety of the children."

In the end, troubling letters describing the conditions in the Jamaica facility compelled her to bring her son home. Four years later, she said he suffers from deep psychological trauma and refuses to speak openly about the experience. Calling the decision to send her son away "the biggest mistake I ever made in my life," Gomez said, "It's just the opposite of what our intent was, what we were sold."

The Cost of Reform

Although several months of residential treatment might at least temporarily stem problematic behavior, experts warn that short-term "success" could mask long-term scars. Some survivors of the treatment experiences report recurring nightmares, anxiety attacks and depression.

In King's case, the cost of survival at Tranquility Bay was emotional desensitization. "After the first month, it broke me," he said, "and after that, I was numb to, you know, anything that was happening." The experience also stoked an angry desire to return to the lifestyle that his family had previously disapproved of. "It almost made me dream about doing those things again," he said, "instead of what it's supposed to do."

Some mental health advocates say oppressive rule systems, in which youth are subjected to constant punishment and accusations of dishonesty and immorality, could crumple an adolescent's social development.

Hellinger characterized the rules imposed on him as "totalitarian. You say what you're allowed to say, which is, you know, that you agree with everything they say." The staff members, he said, "wanted me to be their little programmed machine."

Yet proponents of residential treatment argue that while "tough love" might not feel good, it is necessary to reform a self-destructive teen.

Bob Carter is convinced that a residential program in rural Utah transformed his son from an unruly teen into a responsible adult. He believes the program's key feature is "a positive, conformist sort of element," which becomes "indoctrinated by the kids themselves." Soon, he explained, "they create an environment where the kids more monitor each other than anything else."

But in Huffine's view, "turning kids into narcs is not a good thing, in terms of how you want to help kids... establish some sense of their own social ethics."

Bush said that while a young person could eventually learn to adhere reflexively to rules in a confined environment, conformity itself is not a healthy goal. "You might condition... a rat or a monkey to do something if you punish them enough," she commented. "But it doesn't mean there's been some insight or great growth."

Curbing "Emotional Growth"

Mental health advocacy groups say that in order to prevent mistreatment, the government must hold private treatment facilities to some clinically based standard of care. As an initial step, they are pushing the End Institutionalized Abuse Against Children bill, which would provide seed money to develop state-level regulations.

While some service providers, including WWASPS, have publicly supported moderate state-based regulation, the industry group National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs has contended that bureaucratic monitoring could hinder innovation, and that the government should defer to the industry's own internally developed guidelines.

But Robert Friedman, chair of the Department of Child and Family Studies at the University of South Florida, warned that given the evidence of mistreatment, "there's a danger that if left to self-regulate... there may be the illusion that there's adequate accountability. And that, in some cases, could be worse than at least not having any illusion."

Nonetheless, youth advocates say legal restraints will accomplish little unless the government strengthens and expands the youth behavioral health system.

Mental health experts note that the parents who enroll children in private facilities typically lack insurance coverage for complex therapies. Meanwhile, openings in local mental health programs are so limited that thousands of families struggling to address their children's problems have felt forced to turn them over to the child-welfare or juvenile-justice systems so the state can provide appropriate treatment.

Amid these resource gaps, Friedman said, the growth of the residential treatment industry indicates the need to "develop services and supports close to home, so that families can get the help that they need."

Last year, research by the National Institutes of Health found that while coercive, fear-inducing treatment programs have not proven effective and could aggravate delinquent behavior, more holistic, family-centered approaches have demonstrated positive results in at-risk youth. One federal legislative proposal, the Keeping Families Together Act, would lift restrictions on a special Medicaid waiver to help families use public funds to access community-based treatment.

But enhancing treatment options is only part of the picture, according to Shelby Earnshaw, who underwent a behavior modification program as a teen and now directs the advocacy association International Survivors Action Committee. What fuels the private treatment industry, she argued, is a societal willingness to stigmatize youth with behavioral problems.

Parents who are desperate to "correct" their children, she said, tend to believe that a misbehaving teen is "not worthy of being treated as well... as a kid who didn't do drugs [or] who didn't get involved in crime. I have a big problem with that. Those kids need more help. They need to be treated better."

Former students, prosecutors question methods of some 'tough love' schools

By Cara Connelly
KY3 News (Springfield, MO), April 30, 2004

Jordan Blair has vivid memories of the treatment he and other students received at Mountain Park Baptist Boarding School, a private reform school in Patterson, Mo., north of Poplar Bluff. He says beatings, sleep deprivation and isolation from the outside world were part of the curriculum.

"There were other kids getting slammed around, pushed around, real aggressive behavior," said Blair, 19. "I would sit there and cry myself to sleep at night knowing that I'm standing there, I'm watching this happen and not doing anything about it."

Blair's parents sent him to the school in 2001 at age 16 to keep him from having to go to an Arkansas juvenile facility. A judge in Crawford County, Ark., ruled Blair was a juvenile delinquent after convicting him of making a terroristic threat. The former student remembers severe consequences for misbehavior at Mountain Park, which is a mission of the Mountain Park Baptist Church.

"We have sleep deprivation," said Blair. "Bathroom privileges are extremely limited. You are watched. You have someone who is within what they call slapping distance."

Blair was only at the school for a few weeks before he was transferred to a sister school in Florida. He later escaped from that school.

Blair, who now lives in Alma, Ark., sued Mountain Park, its employees and its owners in federal court. He claimed staff members falsely imprisoned him. He also said the discipline violated his civil rights. A judge threw out most of the lawsuit but, earlier this month, a jury in Cape Girardeau ordered the school to pay Blair $20,000 because a staff member shoved him against a sink on his first day at the school. The school's attorney says he will appeal the verdict.

"In jail, you have certain guidelines and rules and everything," said Blair. "Well, when you go there, you don't know what those rules are. You have no idea. The state doesn't even know what those rules are."

Representatives of Mountain Park did not respond to a reporter's request for comments about Blair's charges.

This isn't an isolated case. Founders and staff members of other religious based schools in Missouri face criminal charges and civil lawsuits that contend their tough love goes too far.

Desperate parents often turn to private schools because they see them as their last chances to save kids who face problems at school, with the law, or with

drugs and alcohol. These tough love schools promise to turn young lives around. Parents pay as much as $1,000 a month.

Missouri seems to attract these schools because the state doesn't regulate them. No specific laws protect their students. They're not even required to have health department inspections of their cafeterias. [Emphasis added]

A former staff member of Mountain Park started Thanks to Calvary Baptist Church & Boarding Academy near Waynesville. Now the Rev. Nathan Day faces four felony child abuse charges. Prosecutors believe Day beat Christopher Jansen. Missouri State Highway Patrol investigators also believe Day tied Jansen to the back of a lawn mower and an ATV and made him run behind them. Each time he fell, according to an investigator's report filed with the criminal charges, Rev. Day dragged him a few feet before stopping.

"I have a young man that's grievously injured, was in a catatonic coma for weeks and weeks and weeks and will need treatment the rest of his life," said Tyce Smith, Jansen's attorney.

The handbook of Thanks to Calvary makes no secret about using corporal punishment. Parents or guardians have to sign an Enrollment Agreement and initial certain sections to acknowledge they understand how children will be treated.

"A maximum of fifteen (15) swats of any kind ... may be administered in a 24-hour period," the Enrollment Agreement says.

Students can also be put in a "Bible Dormitory" and made to wear pajamas and flip-flops, where the lights stay on around the clock. There, students may be forced to sweep a dirt drive and dig a hole with a teaspoon.

In response to a reporter's telephone calls and letters to Thanks to Calvary, asking for a response to the charges and for a tour, the school's attorney answered with a letter.

"We believe the criminal charges are ridiculous," the attorney said. "We believe they are greatly exaggerating the supposed 'injuries' that this young man has received."

At least seven religious reform schools are in Missouri. Some moved here from other states.

"Parents need to understand, the state of Missouri needs to understand, what's actually going on," said Blair.

Former state Sen. Roseanne Bentley, R-Springfield, fought hard for regulation in the Legislature but failed to change Missouri's lack of oversight.

"There's no regulation at all, which is worrisome because the state's responsibility is to the most vulnerable people within the state," said Bentley.

One reform school opened its doors to a reporter and a photographer. Agape Boys Boarding Academy in Stockton, like the other schools, has strict rules and strong religious beliefs but its staff members don't use corporal punishment. A reporter observed misbehaving students doing jumping jacks and standing with their faces to a wall during a meal.

"We do push ups and work details. There are a lot of things we do. We used to do corporal discipline but we've gotten away from it," said director Jim Clemensen. "I believe it in. I think it's right but, as far as us here, we decided not to do it."

Agape's methods seem to be working. Students say the school has turned around their lives.

"If you look at my past and look at the stuff I was doing and look at my future, I might be a pastor and it's like, 'Wow!'" said Lane Gerry, a student at Agape.

Blair hopes his lawsuit will encourage other schools to change their policies.

"These people are going to be held accountable for what they do, not only by some 19-year-old kid but hopefully by the State of Missouri," he said.

Besides Bentley, other lawmakers from both parties have, at different times, proposed bills that would regulate these schools. A state senator from St. Louis has a bill pending this session but doesn't think it will get out of committee.

See related: "Mountain Park Survivors" at www.mountainparksurvivors.com/
See related: "Mountain Park Horrors" at www.mountainparkhorrors.netfirms.com/

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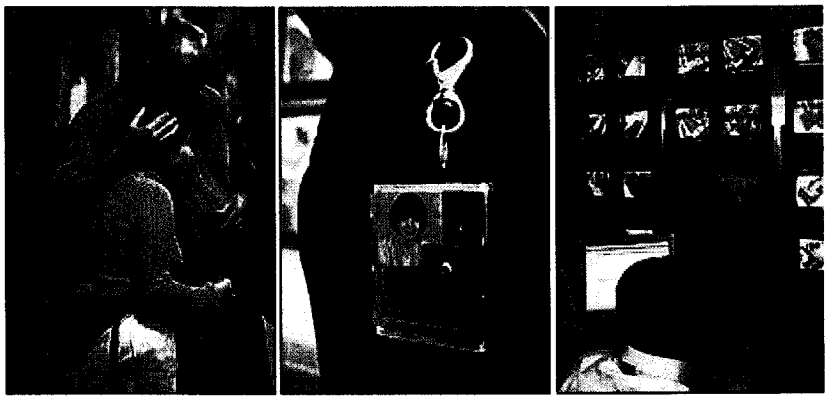

At left, Ricardo Mesa recently hugged his daughter, Nicole, when he visited her at the Rotenberg Center. Center, clear boxes, each with a child's photo, contain the activation switch. At right, rooms in the school are monitored by video cameras. (Photos by John Tlumacki/ Globe Staff)

A question of 'tough love' vs. torture

The Boston Globe

By Scott Allen, Globe Staff | May 22, 2006

CANTON -- When New York regulators meet today to consider limiting a Massachusetts school's use of electric shocks as punishment, it will not be the first time that states have tried to rein in the unorthodox methods at the Judge Rotenberg Educational Center.

Massachusetts officials tried to close the school in 1985 after a student with autism died while being forced to listen to loud static through a helmet. They tried again in the mid-1990s when the school began giving mild shocks to students for misbehavior.

Each time, judges protected the Rotenberg Center, siding with parents who said the school had improved the lives of children with autism, mental retardation, and emotional problems after gentler methods had failed. And doctors concluded the death was caused by the student's neurological disorder.

Now, the center -- the only school in the country to rely so heavily on painful punishments -- faces a challenge from the state that supplies almost two-thirds of its 251 students. Today, the New York Board of Regents is scheduled to debate emergency regulations that would severely limit electric shock and other corporal punishment on students from New York after one New York teen complained that the shocks were a form of torture.

"Mommy, you don't love me anymore 'cause you let them hurt me so bad," sobbed the former Rotenberg Center student, Antwone Nicholson, 17, to his mother, Evelyn, according to her sworn statement. The family plans to sue the state of New York for $10 million for sending the teen to the school where he received 79 two-second shocks over a year and a half.

If New York adopts the rules, Rotenberg officials would need permission from a panel of three specialists for each child they want to shock, in addition to the court and parental approval they already obtain. The limits on the use of electric shock could require a fundamental change in the school's methods -- currently half the students, including 77 from New York, wear electrodes so that teachers can shock them.

But Matthew Israel, the psychologist who founded the school in 1971, is counting on parents to mount an eloquent defense against the limits. They have written 82 letters in support of the school that are posted on its website, www.judgerc.org.

"When you first hear about a school that uses skin shock, it's shocking if you don't understand the severity of the mutilation that the students would otherwise engage in," Israel said.

The debate over the private residential school -- which costs local school districts and states more than $200,000 per student each year -- boils down to whether there are children who pose such a danger to themselves that an

, electroshock version of "tough love" is justified.

Mark Fridovich, deputy commissioner of mental retardation, said in a recent interview, "There are a small number of people who have very severe and frequently multiple problems where other treatments have proven to be ineffective. . . . For this small number, what the Judge Rotenberg Center has done has proven to be effective." More than 60 Massachusetts children and adults attend the school.

But many others say electric shock violates human rights. This year, 20 advocacy groups are pushing a bill in Massachusetts to ban the punishments used at Rotenberg.

"We don't do this to prisoners in the criminal justice system, so we shouldn't be doing it to people with disabilities," said Leo Sarkissian, executive director of the ARC of Massachusetts, an advocacy group for people with mental retardation.

At first blush, the Rotenberg Center seems more like a theme park. Rooms are filled with statues and posters of cartoon characters, chandeliers that glisten like disco balls, and plush, brightly colored furniture. But a close look at the neatly dressed students shows that about 50 percent have electrodes strapped to their arms or legs and that the teachers carry activation switches on their belts inside clear plastic boxes, each labeled with a child's photo.

Student Catherine Spartichino received her first shock after an obscenity-laced rant at a teacher who would give her only half a bagel. With the push of a button, the teacher sent a startling burst of energy into Spartichino's forearm that the 19-year-old remembers vividly four years later.

"They zapped me!" recalled Spartichino, a suicidal teen who was made to wear three electro-shock devices. "It feels like you stick your finger in an electric socket for two seconds, and the tingling didn't stop right away."

Spartichino now believes the electrodes, called "gradual decelerator devices," turned her away from "suicidal gestures" like banging her head until she was black and blue. This month, she graduates from the school and expects to attend college in the fall.

However, one former Rotenberg Center employee said that other students endure far more pain than Spartichino, especially the 15 to 20 who are equipped with higher-powered devices that deliver 45 milliampere shocks -- 4 1/2 times stronger than the standard shocks. Greg Miller, a former teacher's assistant for more than three years, said one boy with autism was shocked by the higher-powered device so often that he had "burn scabs all over his torso, legs, and arms," forcing nurses to remove the electrodes for weeks so that his skin could heal.

State Police are investigating his allegations.

Rotenberg officials deny that the unnamed student was burned, saying the electrodes were removed because of other medical conditions. They also say that the child's parents still support the shock therapy.

The case of Antwone Nicholson is in some ways more typical. He came to the center with a history of aggression after treatment at five psychiatric hospitals, and, with his mother's consent, the school began shocking him for behaviors ranging from defying teachers to banging objects. School officials said his behavior immediately improved.

The school also said that the number of shocks Nicholson received -- about one per week -- is average, and he received them for a shorter period than the 26-month average before transferring recently to another school.

Evelyn Nicholson initially approved the shocks, but said she changed her mind as her son became more desperate, complaining that the shocks knocked him to the floor. Previously, she said, "I was advised that the shock . . . felt like a small pinch," and that the devices were rarely used.

Investigating Nicholson's objections, New York officials found that many more New York students were subjected to shocks than they had believed: 77 out of the 151 at the school. Last week, Rebecca Cort, New York State's deputy education commissioner, called for tight limits on the use of shocks, saying she could find no independent proof that they work.

Though enrollment at the center has tripled in recent years, specialists who treat disabled children question whether so many students need such treatment.

"I have seen about a dozen cases out of hundreds and hundreds that would not respond to our positive-based approaches," said L. Vincent Strully, director of the New England Center for Children, a Southborough program for children with autism. "Behavior that is not life threatening . . . does not require that you shock them."

Scott Allen can be reached at allen@globe.com. ■

Tough-Love Schools Are Both Loved, Hated

Saturday, June 11, 2005

FOX NEWS

LAVERKIN, Utah. — Some schools sprouting up around the United States that are designed to practice tough-love with troubled teens are causing some communities to think twice about bringing one to their town.

The tough-love facilities, which aim to straighten out kids by teaching them how to be more responsible and make better decisions, can be a big help to parents.

Click in the box near the top of the story to watch FOX News' Carol McKinley report this three-part series.

The schools try to "decrease the desirability of unhealthy choices" and "increase the desirability of healthy choices," said Norm Thibault, a therapist at **Cross Creek Academy**, a tough-love facility in Utah.

"Here's a program where there's no swearing, no smoking, no alcohol, no drugs, no boy-and-girl interaction, go to school every day," said Cross Creek owner Karr Farnsworth.

At about $50,000, they're not cheap — although Ken Kay, director of Utah-based **Worldwide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools**, or WWASPS, which maintains six tough-love facilities including Cross Creek, says the cost is well worth it.

It's "barely the cost of a G35 Infinity — the cost of a new car," Kay says.

However, the controversial buzz among parents isn't over the price tag. The schools are strict, and students are not allowed outside the facility. They actually have to earn the privilege to see their parents.

When Julia Burton's daughter was spiraling out of control with alcohol, drugs and promiscuity, she felt the only way to rescue her daughter was to commit her to **Cross Creek Academy**, a WWASPS residential treatment center in Utah.

"I felt my only recourse was to give up my parental rights," Burton told FOX News.

Although Burton, who had to wait five months to see her daughter, said the center has helped her daughter, not every parent is happy.

Terry Cameron said her son, Layne, was abused at Tranquility Bay, a WWASPS center in Jamaica.

Layne says he was duct-taped and forced to sleep with his hands behind his back and says he was abused for minor infractions; pepper spray was often used on him.

"They had both of my ankles and ... they dragged me across the floor and it split my chin and knocked my tooth," Layne said.

The Camerons are among dozens of families planning a direct action lawsuit against WWASPS that includes allegations of fraud, assault and battery and false imprisonment. Kay said to be wary of abuse allegations, since they often come from troubled teens with a history of lying.

Although Layne's experience with the facility was a nightmare, his mother believes the WWASPS programs may be a way for some teens to turn their lives around but she wants parents to think carefully before placing their children in a residential treatment center.

"I totally blame myself," Cameron said.

Experts agree that parents should weigh all their options for helping their troubled teens and not rush into a program in desperation.

Many tough-love facilities appear to be the solution to all the problems the teens are facing. In fact, the schools sound so appealing, parents rarely realize that some programs may be trying to "take advantage of them when they're at their weakest moment," said Dr. Robert Johnson, a psychiatry and pediatrics professor at New Jersey Medical School.

The mixed reviews of the tough-love programs have the attention of New York Attorney General **Elliot Spitzer** who is investigating whether a WWASPS school in his state obtained the necessary academic accreditation legally.

"I think it's more about being sure that the academic program is accredited properly and operating properly, and we are a hundred percent in favor of that," said WWASPS president Kay.

But Spitzer is not the only person looking into WWASPS. Rep. **George Miller**, D-Calif., introduced federal legislation regarding oversight of residential treatment programs and wants the U.S. Justice Department to make unscheduled visits to WWASPS facilities.

Despite the prospect of economic benefits, the town of Boonville, Mo., took note of the questions surrounding WWASPS schools and rejected a proposal by the organization's founder to open a school there.

Families, politicians, doctors and government agencies are divided on whether WWASPS programs are successful and safe. But Johnson said the schools aren't even necessary.

"The best place for your children to get better is at home, and that's always the case," he said.