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Lawsuit alleges abuse at treatment center for children

Case raises questions about how long CYFD was aware of the allegations

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LOS LUNAS, N.M. — The Children Youth and Family Department shut down a treatment center that was designed to assist at-risk boys after alleged child abuse.

Target 7 obtained information that shows the state and CYFD were aware of the allegations before taking action.

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The Los Niño's Academy helped treat boys from living at a residence in Los Lunas. Attorney Kate Ferlic, who is representing three boys in a pending lawsuit, said the boys living at the home had already been victims before their arrival.

"It was licensed by CYFD in order to provide treatment services for children who were victims of sexual assault and had some misbehavior issues because of that," Ferlic said.

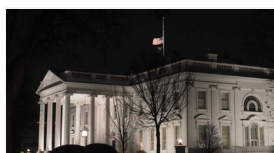
Target 7 got a hold of police records and a pending lawsuit that showed those boys in the home became victims once again. For Ferlic, her clients' ages range from 8 to 15 years old.

One of the boys in the lawsuit alleged the staff forced them to run laps as a form of

punishment; The staff also deprived them of water while running. But the alleged abuse didn't stop at the staff.

One child in the lawsuit alleged that older boys engaged in sexual contact without the other party's consent. Ferlic said the treatment center worked opposite of its purpose.

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"They were placed in residential treatment in order to receive compassionate care," Ferlic said. "And what they received was further abuse."

CYFD shut down Los Niño's Academy in May 2021, but numerous complaints were made to the department prior to its closure. The department did open an investigation into the incidents.

"CYFD received many reports of abuse and did open an investigation in 2020," Ferlic said. "[CYFD] made findings that abuse was occurring, but as a sanction, CYFD decided to leave the children that were there in the care of the facility, but not allow them to accept new children."

New Mexico State Police interviewed the children at Los Niño's Academy, however, no one was charged as a result. They turned the case over to the Valencia County Sherriff's Office.

A VCSO spokesperson said there was not enough evidence to pursue charges in the case. Ferlic said the various allegations should have led to more response.

"I think it was a failure of the system," Ferlic said. "I think it was a failure for these children to

be left in a facility with so many substantiated allegations of abuse and they should have been removed immediately."

The lawsuit lists CYFD along with Youth Health Associates, who ran the facility prior to its 2021 forced closure. YHA operates six other treatment facilities in the southwest.

YHA attorney Nathan Crane wrote in a statement that said: "We deny the allegations made against YHA. We look forward to presenting outside of this case in court."

CYFD also offered a statement regarding Los Niño's Academy: "[CYFD] closed the facility and removed the children on May 19-20, 2021. The department worked closely with law enforcement during that time to ensure the safety and protection of the children."

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