



RESIDENTIAL PROGRAMS

Selected Cases of Death, Abuse, and Deceptive Marketing

Highlights of [GAO-08-713T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In October 2007, GAO testified before the Committee regarding allegations of abuse and death in private residential programs across the country such as wilderness therapy programs, boot camps, and boarding schools. GAO also examined selected closed cases where a youth died while enrolled in one of these private programs.

Many cite positive outcomes associated with specific types of residential programs. However, due to continuing concerns about the safety and well-being of youth enrolled in private programs, the Committee requested that GAO (1) identify and examine the facts and circumstances surrounding additional closed cases where a teenager died, was abused, or both, while enrolled in a private program; and (2) identify cases of deceptive marketing or questionable practices in the private residential program industry.

To develop case studies of death and abuse, GAO conducted numerous interviews and examined documents from eight closed cases from 1994 to 2006. GAO used covert testing along with other investigative techniques to identify, for selected cases, deceptive marketing or questionable practices. Specifically, posing as fictitious parents with fictitious troubled teenagers, GAO called 14 programs and related services. GAO did not attempt to evaluate the benefits of private residential programs and its results cannot be projected beyond the specific programs and services that GAO reviewed.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-713T](#). For more information, contact Gregory Kutz at (202) 512-6722 or kutzg@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

In the eight closed cases GAO examined, ineffective management and operating practices, in addition to untrained staff, contributed to the death and abuse of youth enrolled in selected programs. The practice of physical restraint also figured prominently in three of the cases. The restraint used for these cases primarily involved one or more staff members physically holding down a youth. See the table below for detailed information related to three of the case studies.

Examples of Case Studies GAO Examined

| Sex/age | Date of death/abuse | Case details |
|-------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Male, 14–18 | 1994 to 1998 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Victim was restrained over 250 times while attending the program; in at least two cases, restraint lasted over 12 hours One method of restraint included wrapping the victim in a blanket and tying him up Was required to attend the program for 4 years and was held against his will after his 18th birthday |
| Male, 16 | Mar. 1998 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For several weeks, victim complained of chest pain and difficulty breathing Staff forced him to do push-ups and carry cinder blocks as punishment for refusing an assigned task Victim died from an accumulation of infectious pus in his chest Autopsy found more than 70 injuries on his body, including some from blunt force |
| Male, 16 | Feb. 2006 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three staff members held the victim facedown to restrain him After 10 minutes of restraint, victim said he could not breathe and was eventually taken to the hospital School was aware victim suffered from asthma, but staff members who restrained him said they were not Victim died of abnormal heartbeat |

Source: Records including police reports, legal documents, and state investigative documents.

Posing as fictitious parents with fictitious troubled teenagers, GAO found examples of deceptive marketing and questionable practices in certain industry programs and services. For example, one Montana boarding school told GAO’s fictitious parents that their child must apply using an application form before they are admitted. But after a separate call, a program representative e-mailed an acceptance letter for GAO’s fictitious child even though an application was never submitted. In another example, the Web site for one referral service states: “We will look at your special situation and help you select the best school for your teen with individual attention.” However, GAO called this service three times using three different scenarios related to different fictitious children, and each time the referral agent recommended a Missouri boot camp. Investigative work revealed that the owner of the referral service is married to the owner of the boot camp. GAO also called a program established as a 501(c)(3) charity that advocated a potentially fraudulent tax scheme. The scheme involves the friends and family of a child making tax-deductible “donations” to the charity, which are then credited to an account in the program the child is enrolled in. GAO referred this charity to the Internal Revenue Service for criminal investigation.