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State's oversight of school lambasted

Majestic Ranch:

A watchdog group says Utah hasn't done enough to protect the kids enrolled there

By KIRSTEN STEWART
The Salt Lake Tribune

Armed with a whistleblower report, a watchdog group met Monday at the Capitol to protest the state's "half-baked" investigation into allegations of abuse and neglect at northern Utah's Majestic Ranch Boarding School.

Based on signed affidavits from four former employees, the report portrays the school catering to 7- to 14-year-olds with behavioral problems as understaffed, overcrowded and unsanitary. It alleges that animals at the 2,000-acre working ranch are neglected. And it contains complaints of abusive restraint practices, with students thrown to the ground and hog-tied, their faces shoved in snow or manure.

An investigation into similar complaints conducted earlier this month by Utah's Division of Child and Protective Services (CPS) and local law enforcement turned up some health and safety violations, but failed to yield enough evidence to support removing children or notifying parents.

Crusaders against get-tough treatment programs say more than a "slap on the wrist" is needed to protect the 60-plus students enrolled at Majestic Ranch, located north of Randolph.

"It's a shame when child protection agencies fail to protect children. It's almost as bad as those who are alleged to have caused harm to the children in the first place," said Thomas F. Coleman, an attorney and director of Emancipation Project, a human rights organization in Glendale, Calif.

Insinuating that Majestic Ranch's well-financed lobbying efforts may have caused the state to go easy on the school, Coleman said he is sending a copy of the report to the U.S.

"It's a shame when child protection agencies fail to protect children."

THOMAS F. COLEMAN
Emancipation Project

Attorney General's office and asking the federal government to intervene.

Majestic Ranch director Tammy Johnson says the complaints were fabricated by "disgruntled" ex-employees. And she says the report's author, Isabelle Zehnder, has phoned the school "harassing employees" and posing as a CPS caseworker.

The report also contains a condemning e-mail from CPS caseworker Wanda Lundahl warning Zehnder against tipping media off to the investigation.

"Trust me Isabelle ... nobody wants to shut this place

down more than the Utah 'team,'" wrote Lundahl. "We are all well aware that 'clean up' efforts could be going on even as we speak but still, the investigation must be well planned or it will fail to have meaningful results."

The e-mail continued: "I hope and pray that this investigation will be successful in exposing the horrid manner that these kids are being treated."

Division spokeswoman Carol Sisco confirmed Lundahl wrote the e-mail, but said, "the opinion of one caseworker doesn't reflect the whole department."

As proof that Majestic Ranch has nothing to hide, Johnson said she is endorsing legislation that would bring the school under state licensure, making it subject to routine inspections and the threat of being shut down for violations.

She said, "We want parents to feel good about having their kids here knowing they are safer and watched over and protected."

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Utah boarding school under fire

Group is seeking a federal probe into abuse allegations

By Dennis Rombo
Deseret Morning News

A children's advocacy group is calling for a federal investigation into a northern Utah boarding school it claims mistreats students, including restraining them face down in manure.

Based on sworn statements of four former employees, the California-based Emancipation Project says the Majestic Ranch is unsanitary and unsafe for the children living there.

Majestic Ranch is a working ranch for troubled children near Randolph in Rich County. It houses 55 children ages 8 to 14.

"We believe the people of Utah will not put up with child abuse," said Thomas F. Coleman, a civil-rights attorney who heads the Emancipation Project. "We should not have to go to the federal government when we have hard evidence like this."

Thomas and Isabelle Zehnder, of Vancouver, Wash., distributed a report Zehnder compiled about the ranch to state lawmakers and elected officials last week. They also plan to send it to Congress and the U.S. attorney general.

The 13-page report outlines allegations of abusive practices, dirty living conditions, lack of medical care and unhealthy foods. It also chastises the state Division of Child Protective Services and local authorities for not intervening.

Majestic Ranch director Tammy Johnson said the

report contained "serious misrepresentations." She called the accusations "definitely a personal vendetta" on the part of disgruntled former employees and even state officials who want the program shut down.

"We're not going to continue to sit back and let employees and the state attack us," she said. "We really feel like we've been a bull's-eye target for too long."

At Majestic's behest, the Rich County Sheriff's Office is investigating trespassing and theft allegations against former employees, Sheriff Dale Stacey said. No charges have been filed.

Because Majestic Ranch considers itself a boarding school, it does not need an operating license under state law. But that will change.

The 2005 Utah Legislature passed a bill that requires licenses for boarding schools.

"It allows us to review basic health and safety conditions," said Ken Stettler, Utah Department of Human Services' Office of Licensing director.

Licensure also provides for employee background checks, unannounced inspections and follow-up on complaints, he said.

Utah Division of Child and Family Services caseworkers, state health and local fire and police officials toured the ranch last month.

"The bulk of the complaints were deemed to be not credible," the sheriff said, noting there were a couple of minor fire-safety issues.

Child welfare officials did not find any children in danger.

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While (Majestic Ranch) may be doing things we don't like, there was nothing that we considered abuse.”

Carol Sisco
spokeswoman,
Department of Human Services

considered abuse," said Carol Sisco, Department of Human Services spokeswoman. "There were allegations, but we weren't able to find that any specific children were abused or neglected."

Karleen Farnsworth quit her job as a Majestic Ranch house parent in January after three weeks.

"I was unable to stand it any longer," she said.

A former state youth corrections worker, Farnsworth said she saw children punished by having to stand outside on milk crates in sub-freezing temperatures or forced to shovel manure with their bare hands.

Uncooperative children were wrestled to the ground, sometimes face first in manure, according to the affidavit of former worker Jared Quick.

Johnson said workers do use a physical restraint hold on out-of-control children as a last resort, but they can't choose the time or place it happens.

There was an incident where a child swinging a pitchfork at

another child was restrained in a manure pile, she said.

"It's certainly not malicious," Johnson said.

The food and water made children sick, and those on medication for mental illnesses received the wrong dosages of medication, Farnsworth said. Also, she said an outbreak of scabies among some girls went untreated.

Johnson said children live in clean rooms, eat dietitian-approved meals and get proper medical care.

Majestic Ranch is one of eight programs affiliated with St. George-based Worldwide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools or WWASPS. Allegations of abuse and neglect have been leveled against several of its facilities the past few years, all of which company officials have denied.

California Congressman George Miller has repeatedly called for the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate WWASPS and similar programs.

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