

Press Release from Congressman George Miller

House Approves Legislation to Stop Child Abuse in Teen Residential Programs

Bill Would Help Ensure Parents Have Information They Need to Keep their Children Safe

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WASHINGTON, DC -- The U.S. House of Representatives today approved bipartisan legislation to protect teenagers attending residential programs from physical, mental, and sexual abuse and to prevent deceptive marketing practices by operators of residential programs for teens.

Investigations by the Government Accountability Office have uncovered thousands of cases and allegations of child abuse in recent years at teen residential programs across the country, including therapeutic boarding schools, boot camps, wilderness camps, and behavior modification facilities. Currently, these programs are governed only by a weak patchwork of state and federal standards. The GAO has found major gaps in the licensing and oversight of residential programs – some of which are exempt from state licensing standards altogether.

The Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act of 2008 (H.R. 6358), which the House passed by an overwhelming bipartisan vote of 318 to 103, would establish minimum standards for preventing child abuse and neglect at teen residential programs. It would require the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to investigate complaints of child abuse and neglect at residential programs and to issue penalties against programs that violate the new standards. The bill calls for states, within three years, to take on the responsibility of setting and enforcing standards for youth residential programs.

The legislation would also help ensure that parents have the information about teen residential programs that they need to make safer choices for their children.

“In far too many cases, the very people entrusted with the safety, health, and welfare of these children are the ones who violate that trust in some of the worst ways imaginable,” said U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), the chairman of the Committee, and one of the bill’s authors. “We have a responsibility to keep kids safe no matter what setting they are in. With today’s vote, the House has made it clear that these abuses have gone on for far too long and they won’t be tolerated anymore.”

“It is absolutely crucial that we keep children safe when they are in these facilities by setting minimum safety standards, and stopping residential programs from using the kind of deceptive marketing that have drawn in so many parents.,” said U.S. Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), the chairwoman of the House Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities and the co-author of this legislation.”

The GAO’s investigation revealed that teen residential programs may be using deceptive marketing practices and questionable tactics to lure vulnerable parents desperate to find help for their children.

Among other things, H.R. 6358 would create a toll-free national hotline for individuals to report cases of abuse at residential programs and a website with information about substantiated cases of abuse and any child fatalities at residential programs. The bill would require programs to provide children with adequate food, water, and medical care. And to prevent deceptive marketing practices and create transparency to help parents make safer choices for their children, it would require, among other things, that programs inform parents of their staff members’ qualifications, roles, and responsibilities.

It is estimated that tens of thousands of U.S. teenagers attend residential programs each year.

For more information on today’s legislation and past GAO investigations, [click here](#).