

## 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.

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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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