

Lawsuit claims abuse at youth jail

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BILOXI — A lawsuit filed on behalf of a 17-year-old boy claims he and others at the Harrison County Juvenile Detention Center were abused over the past two months and were forced to live in unsanitary conditions.

Advocates who filed the lawsuit against Harrison County on Monday said the alleged abuses against a youth identified in court papers as "D.W." are similar to complaints they've heard from other youths.

D.W., speaking at a news conference at the NAACP office in Biloxi, said he was abused before and after he was placed on suicide watch.

Devonsha Fairley reads a statement by her son stating he has been abused at the Harrison County Juvenile Detention Center during a press conference on Monday in Biloxi. The Mississippi Youth Justice Project announced the filing of a suit against Harrison County on behalf of Fairley's son, identified in court papers as D.W.

"I threatened to kill myself and the guards told me to go ahead," D.W. said. "So I tried to hang myself. I didn't want to be dead, I just wanted to go home and get out of that place."

D.W. claims he was on suicide watch when he was attacked by a guard.

"A guard choked me from behind and slammed me on the floor," he said. "Then one guard sat on my back. While that guard held me down, another guard dropped his knee on my neck, slammed my face to the floor and then pushed my face into the concrete. I couldn't breathe."

Devonsha Fairley, D.W.'s mother, said she was unaware of the alleged incident until she went to visit her son and noticed bruising around his wrists.

The youth was released from custody on Monday.

The lawsuit claims youths at the center are shackled for punishment, assaulted by the staff and receive inadequate mental health care. The complaint also claims the youths are in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions that contribute to scabies and staph infections.

The lawsuit was filed by the Mississippi Youth Justice Project and the Mississippi Protection and Advocacy System Inc.

The detention center is on McElroy Street and is operated by Mississippi Security Police Inc. of Pascagoula. According to the lawsuit, the company is paid about \$1.6 million a year to house up to 48 youths but sometimes has as many as 60.

"It is a travesty that the county has chosen to let a private company profit by neglecting and abusing our children," said Vanessa Carroll, a staff attorney for Justice Project.

Tim Holleman, attorney for Mississippi Security Police, said he's never heard of the allegations.

"We deny the allegations," Holleman said. "I do know one time a year ago a client of mine there got a staph infection, but I called and advised them and they addressed it.

"But it's very suspicious to me that these folks would come down and file this kind of lawsuit without having previously brought it to the attention of the Board of Supervisors. I think it's a bunch of grandstanding to hold a press conference like that."

Joe Meadows, Harrison County attorney, said he received a copy of the lawsuit Monday afternoon but had not had time to read it.

"The board can only act through its minutes," Meadows said. "I will review it and send it to the board so they can authorize a response at their next meeting on the first Monday in May."

The lawsuit claims that advocates have been denied access into the center to provide federally mandated services for children with disabilities.

The lawsuit is not seeking a specific amount of money but is asking the federal court to monitor the center and award the plaintiffs reasonable costs and attorneys' fees.

Justice Project attorneys said they have interviewed more than 30 children in the past two months.

Attorneys said the Justice Project supports alternatives to detention for youths who pose no threat to public safety. The alternatives include electronic monitoring and day reporting centers.