

Moms angry over how state removed children from Ranch for Kids

Phil Drake | July 26, 2019

Two mothers whose daughters were removed Tuesday from the Ranch for Kids in northwest Montana criticized the state Friday for how the situation was handled, saying the methods used caused extreme trauma for the children and their families.

Clare Higgins of Pennsylvania and Tane Larrabee of Hawaii, in separate telephone interviews with the Tribune, said they were both notified by staff at the ranch near Rexford and not the state that their daughters had been removed. They said the state had set up a hotline that did not take messages if someone did not answer the phone, and Higgins said they did not let children, some of whom were victims of sexual abuse, choose if they were to be checked by male or female doctors who performed body checks.

"I understand why they did what they did, but the method they (used) paid no heed to what it would do to these children," Higgins said.

Larrabee said she wished the state had contacted her.

"If I had a phone call from state of Montana that said they were shutting the place down and saying 'Collect your child or we'll take her into custody,' I would have done something to prevent my daughter from going through what she has been through."

Montana officials removed 27 children from the youth treatment facility due to allegations of egregious, chronic and persistent child abuse and neglect. The allegations include physical and psychological abuse and assaults of children by staff at the ranch, including an allegation that a student was shot at with a nail gun, state health officials said. The Lincoln County Sheriff's Office and Montana Department of Justice's Division of Criminal Investigation assisted DPHHS.

Students, ages 11-17, allegedly were hit, kicked, body slammed and spit on by staff. The staff was also accused of inflicting persistent psychological abuse on children and using excessive discipline, including 15-20 mile walks on remote forest service roads in harsh conditions, with improper or no shoes. They were also accused of withholding food and prolonged isolation.

The private facility's license has been suspended, but executive director William Sutley says he wants to reopen. State officials said it was true that they did not contact the parents before the removals, but said there was a reason:

"We had information that there were weapons on site at the Ranch for Kids. That alone created a potential safety risk for the youth and our 20 child welfare workers who conducted the removals and law enforcement who supported the operation," said Jon Ebel, spokesman for the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS).

“This operation ultimately involved extensive coordination and planning across many state and local entities from DPHHS to the local county attorney, and local and state law enforcement entities,” Ebelt said. “Removing 27 children at one time and ensuring their safety and trauma-informed care was critical and involved extensive planning.”

They said they have been able to contact all parents of the children. Some of the children have gone home with their parents already and there are some children who remain in Montana.

Larrabee said her 14-year-old daughter was being transported from Missoula to Great Falls shortly after being removed from the ranch when the vehicle she was in hit a deer. She said her daughter, who was born in Kazakhstan, was told to stay in the vehicle until another ride arrived.

State officials said there was a collision with a vehicle and a deer, but there were no injuries and only minor damage to the car.

State officials said Friday they worked to ensure that the care moving forward for these children still in its custody is "trauma-informed and safe."

They said Dr. Eric Arzubi of Billings Clinic, who is the clinical lead, is working with them to ensure that these kids who after a series of traumas are being treated with respect. Arzubi is the chair of psychiatry at Billings Clinic and is a board-certified child and adolescent psychiatrist, they said.

“We took great care to make sure the needs of the children were met once we transported them off site, including medical, mental health and nutrition needs,” Ebelt said.

He said measures have taken to make sure the needs of the children were met once they moved off site, including medical, mental health and nutrition needs.

They said a toll free number was used for parents to call the state and many people have continued to call to provide information about Ranch for Kids. That number is 1-888-200-8002. There is now an option to leave a recorded message. They did not say why there was no option to record a message earlier in the week.

Higgins, who is a supervisor for a family mentor and advocacy network that helps families with children who have behavioral problems, said she plans to file a complaint with the state.

“This is not how it should be handled,” she said. “I don’t want money, I just don’t want it to happen to other children.”

Larrabee said she is looking for lawyers, saying that whatever progress her daughter made at the ranch has been for naught. She said it took two years to get her daughter to buy into the program and to get to the point of thinking in a healthy way.

"What a tragedy," she said.

The ranch offers a treatment program for children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Reactive Attachment Disorder. It primarily provides services to adopted children from Russia.



The Ranch for Kids, a working ranch for troubled adopted children, founded by Joyce Sterkel in Eureka. (Photo: Tom Bauer, AP)

As of July 1, a new state law transfers authority of the Private Alternative Adolescent Residential and Outdoor Program to DPHHS. Prior to July 1, the department did not have licensing authority over these programs. An investigation by the Missoulian found the ranch received few sanctions despite several complaints.

Higgins said the girls were separated from each other, taken out by law enforcement officers with guns, not told what was going

on nor were they allowed to bring items with them. Higgins and her husband flew to Montana upon learning what had happened to their 16-year-old daughter and picked her up and returned to Pennsylvania. She said they needed to provide documentation they were fit parents before their daughter would be released to them.

“She was sobbing, petrified and crying,” Higgins said.

She said her daughter, who the family adopted from Russia when she was 15 months old, had been at the ranch for two years and was set to be released Aug. 15.

Larrabee said she worked by telephone to ask officials not to interview her daughter, fearing it could trigger issues that the teen had worked hard to overcome. She said she was told the state had a right to conduct the interview.

Higgins said she understands that the allegations against the home have to be investigated, but her daughter did not have a negative experience at the ranch.

“I found the staff to be unbelievably loving, patient and caring,” she said. Higgins said her daughter was at a point where she could not be able to live safely at home and needed a place to work on some issues.

“The folks at the ranch never gave up on her and her behaviors were pretty extreme,” Higgins said, adding these are children require love not as traditional as you would expect.

“She is a completely different child than the child we sent. She is strong, brave, insightful,” she said. “The people there have changed her life and changed our life as well.

“If I thought for one second any abuse was going on -- any inkling -- she would have been pulled out of there in a hot second,” Higgins said. “It was life-saving and life-changing. It’s probably not the right place for everyone, but it was the right choice for her.”

Larrabee agreed, saying she had never heard any negative reports about the ranch. She said if there were allegations, they needed to be investigated, much like anywhere else.

"I have no problem," she said. "What I do have a problem with, is how the state of Montana did this. This was handled like a raid on some place where people would step out of the building with assault weapons and mow you down."

Higgins said her daughter is at home and OK, but saddened by her abrupt departure from the ranch.

"I only had 24 days with my family there before I came home, and they took that away from me," Higgins said her daughter said.

Larrabee said her daughter was at the ranch for two years and there was a 100% improvement, to the degree she was a different child.

"It was to the point I saw her future," Larrabee said. "It was a huge wave of relief. I felt like singing from the hilltops, like OK, she is going to be OK, I think she will be OK."