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Mother sues after boy dies at camp

By **CURTIS KRUEGER**

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Just before entering a camp for troubled boys, 12-year-old Michael Wiltsie was taken off medicines that helped control his hyperactivity and defiant behavior.

The reason? Camp E-Kel-Etu would not accept youths taking such medicines.

But Clearwater-based Eckerd Youth Alternatives should have known that taking Michael off Ritalin and Clondine would "foreseeably lead to erratic behavior that would place Michael and others at risk of great bodily harm," according to a federal lawsuit filed in Jacksonville on Monday.

Shortly after entering the camp, Michael started to fight with another camper. Michael, who weighed 65 pounds, was restrained by camp counselor Joseph Cooley, who weighed 300. The boy died of "compressional asphyxiation," meaning he was squeezed so tightly that he could not breathe.

Michael's mother, Linda Ibarra, filed the federal lawsuit seeking \$13.2-million for the "cruel and unusual" punishment alleged in the suit.

In addition to saying that Michael should have been allowed to continue taking his medicines, the lawsuit also alleges that Eckerd staffers used improper restraints at the camp.

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Cooley, the counselor, and Eckerd, the non-profit organization that operates the camp in Marion County, were named as defendants in the lawsuit. Camp E-Kel-Etu, in Ocala National Forest, has a contract with the state Department of Juvenile Justice to rehabilitate youths who have been ruled delinquent.

"This is just nothing but an accident," he said. "It's tragic."

Andy Anderson, an Eckerd vice president and spokesman, said he had not seen the lawsuit and could not comment on it.

Ellis Rubin, attorney for Linda Ibarra, held a news conference in Jacksonville on Monday during which an enlarged color photo of the boy's body on an autopsy table was displayed.

The picture showed the boy's dirty and bruised face. A tube was in his mouth and electrodes were taped to his chest.

Ibarra, who stood wiping her eyes with a tissue, spoke of her son's death as friends and relatives held posters and red balloons.

"I feel like Michael received a death sentence, while I've received a life sentence of pain and suffering," she said.

This lawsuit is the latest of several actions stemming from Michael's death. A separate lawsuit has been filed in Marion County.

A grand jury cleared Cooley of criminal wrongdoing, saying he was restraining the boy in the way he had been taught. But it criticized the Department of Juvenile Justice for placing Michael in a wilderness camp when he needed a mental health program.

The lawsuit alludes to that issue by pointing out that the state's contract with Eckerd requires it to "ensure access to necessary and appropriate mental health and/or substance abuse treatment services to youth in need of such services."

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The suit also says that Eckerd was "deliberately indifferent to the use of improper and unauthorized restraint techniques."

_ Information from the Associated Press was included in this report.

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