

Two Utah teen centers under fire for using 'gooseneck' holds and other 'painful restraints'

One facility is being sued after a staffer broke a boy's wrist, while another has been disciplined by the state for similar tactics.

 (Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) West Ridge Academy in West Jordan, on Friday, Jan. 22, 2021.

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By Jessica Miller | Nov. 19, 2021, 12:00 p.m. | Updated: 4:27 p.m.

The 15-year-old boy said a West Ridge Academy staffer grabbed his wrist because he wasn't moving fast enough to detention.

The staffer, Tyler Feinga, put his arm around the teenager's, pushing the boy's hand forward as far as it could go, the youth's fingers moving closer to the inside of his forearm.

Then, the boy felt three pops.

"I [was] crying in the desk," the boy later wrote in a court statement, "while he was yelling at me, telling me I think I'm so funny."

This is what's called a "gooseneck" hold, a type of restraint taught to employees at "troubled-teen" facilities across Utah. It involves a staffer pushing a kid's hand into his forearm as the wrist bends forward — the silhouette resembling a goose's neck — until the pain causes a child to comply.

It's been a common restraint used at these types of teen treatment facilities and, up until six months ago, the state allowed youth programs to put kids in these painful positions in certain situations.

That's changed. New legislation, enacted in May, bans these bent-wrist holds and painful restraints.

But back on Jan. 4, when this 15-year-old boy was hurt, it wasn't outright banned. And state regulators didn't punish West Ridge Academy after investigating.

Feinga was fired, according to facility administrators, and [he faces a charge of misdemeanor child abuse](#). He has pleaded not guilty.

The boy's mother is now suing West Ridge Academy, alleging that the facility ignored her son's injury until another boy was also hurt in a similar hold two days later.

"He told me his wrist hurt a lot and no one had given him anything for the pain," the mother wrote in a court affidavit. "He said Tyler bent his wrist while he was at school and it cracked. He also said after the incident, Tyler apologized and told him he was sorry for losing his temper."

A broken wrist

West Ridge Academy's campus sprawls 50 acres, with a dozen or so multicolored brick cottages scattered through the property that can house up to 68 kids. It's one of Utah's oldest youth treatment centers, tucked between new housing developments and storage units in West Jordan.

The 15-year-old boy, who is from California, got there in late December. A week after, Feinga had put him in that gooseneck hold.

Why Feinga restrained the boy is in dispute. The facility reported to regulators that the teenager was being disruptive in class and when Feinga was escorting him to detention, the youth "started to swing attempting to get away from Tyler."

But the boy wrote in a sworn statement filed in court that Feinga grabbed him because he wasn't walking fast enough.

Treatment center employees are allowed to physically restrain residents, but Utah has rules they are supposed to follow. They aren't supposed to use force as punishment, only putting their hands on a youth if he or she "presents imminent danger to self or others."

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) West Ridge Academy in West Jordan, Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2020.

The mother alleges in her lawsuit that her son didn't get medical care until two days later, after another boy was injured.

State records detail a similar situation in which a boy had been escorted from his desk to another area to eat lunch. West Ridge staffers told state regulators that the boy began throwing food, and hit a staffer in the leg with his arm. The staffer then restrained him.

The youngster cried and screamed afterward, a staffer reported, and couldn't calm down. Staffers told regulators they put ice on his swollen wrist. The lawsuit says that doctors determined that boy's wrist was also broken.

In its report to the state, West Ridge administrators said after the second boy was hurt, that it would work to "take any bent wrist or pressure [restraints] out of training. Also adding a training for our younger and smaller clients."

Regulators with the Utah Office of Licensing reviewed these cases but didn't take much action. They required the facility to create a "corrective action plan" in which West Ridge administrators write down what they'll change — but that's not considered punitive.

The mother who filed a lawsuit alleges that West Ridge did not properly train Feinga, and did not give her child the medical care he needed. She also alleges that she paid more than \$13,000 for her son to be at West Ridge Academy for about a month, but she didn't get her money back once a government Adoption Assistance Program kicked in and paid the same amount to the facility to cover the boy's costs.

West Ridge Academy did not respond to a request for comment.

'The ban needs to stay'

Utah legislators [earlier this year passed the first reform](#) to regulations governing the teen treatment industry in 15 years. The bill, sponsored by Sen. Mike McKell, R-Spanish Fork, specifically prohibits congregate care programs from "inducing pain to gain compliance" and "hyperextending joints."

Those new rules took effect in May. Already, state regulators have threatened to pull the license of one facility for continuing to use these restraints.

State regulators recently told White River Academy, a 36-bed facility in Delta, that it needs to make a dozen changes or risk being shut down.

Investigators said in a Notice of Agency Action that they reviewed video footage from three incidents in September and October, when staffers used pain to induce compliance, hyperextended residents' joints and "force[d] the child to take an uncomfortable position" — all of which are barred under the new law. Other staffers observed the inappropriate restraint, the notice reads, but didn't intervene.

The facility also inappropriately used seclusion, regulators say, even though there was not an "immediate health and safety need" for it.

White River Academy did not respond to a request for comment.

Both White River and West Ridge use the same restraint training program called Positive Control Systems, according to state documents and their websites.

The PCS program got its start in Utah, and its website once stated it is used in 15 states. It's owned by Matthew Cooper, who says he is a former Army interrogator, martial artist and is a licensed massage therapist.

Utah's Juvenile Justice System once used PCS' training, but the director said Wednesday that the state moved away from that training more than a decade ago.

[PCS' website](#) says it's currently under construction — and the company name has been rebranded to “Positive Communication Systems” — but a previous version of the site shows Cooper taught staffers how to do “bent wrist,” “gooseneck,” and “ulnar wrist” holds, among others. The [cover of his training DVD](#) shows a hand tightly grasped around a wrist.

(Positive Control Systems) This 2015 version of Positive Control Systems' website shows a training DVD that teaches congregate care workers bent wrist techniques and other restraint holds.

Cooper initially agreed to talk with The Salt Lake Tribune but has since stopped responding to interview requests about whether his training has changed with the new regulations.

“Positive Communications Systems follows state guidelines, including SB127,” he wrote in a text Wednesday.

McKell, the legislator who sponsored the new law, said he's had some pushback from treatment centers that want to use painful restraints on kids in certain circumstances, which he called “extremely troubling.”

“The ban needs to stay in place,” he said Tuesday.

The bill flew through the Legislature with little pushback earlier this year — until the final vote, when a state representative tried to push an amendment that would have allowed these sorts of painful restraints. Rep. Rex Shipp, R-Cedar City, asked for the amendment on behalf of Havenwood Academy, a facility that

recently came under scrutiny after it was discovered that it [had been placing girls in horse troughs filled with water](#) as part of a “therapeutic discipline.”

“This just enables them to inflict a little bit of pain to get the person under compliance,” Shipp said during the debate. “Typically a bent wrist. I don’t know if you’ve ever had somebody bend your wrist. It can create some pretty good pain to get the compliance.”

The House rejected Shipp’s addition. But Ken Huey, Havenwood’s executive director, said in March that staffers still are concerned that without pain restraints, they won’t be able to stop a girl who is hurting herself.

“A bent wrist they’ll recover from in five minutes,” he said. “We don’t want to use them. There’s very few people even trained that are allowed to do that. I’m actually cool with never using a bent wrist control. I hate them. I don’t like them at all. If I have some other way to keep that kid safe, I’m in. Just tell me what it is.”

McKell said it’s possible that more clarification is needed in the law about defining what exactly is a painful restraint, but he said he doesn’t believe legislators should go any further than that.

“One of the purposes of a congregate care program is to provide actual therapy,” he said. “Those pain restraints are counterproductive to that.”

Editor’s note • This story is part of [Sent Away](#), an investigative reporting partnership of The Salt Lake Tribune, KUER and APM Reports.

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When I was challenged with raising teen boys a while back, I once read a parents lament regarding teenagers in a self help book. The quoted text pretty much described behaviors that mirrored a list of symptoms of troubled teens in a full page ad in this newspaper for one of these help centers. The quote was from a Phoenician 2500 years ago. While some teens act out in a manner beyond the control of their parents, I believe these "help centers" are preying upon and making big bucks on a normal human process all teens and parents have to slog through.

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