

A faith-based school in Whitmore is being accused of punishing students for being gay

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River View Christian Academy in Whitmore, California. KRCR.

WHITMORE, Calif. — The California government wants to shutdown a small Christian school following a [BuzzFeed News investigation](#) detailing accusations that officials failed to report abuse and punished kids who expressed that they were gay or bisexual.

The school, known as River View Christian Academy, is located in a remote location of Whitmore, California.

Whitmore is in Shasta County.

The Director of the Academy told KRCR that they are a faith-based, year-round private school that takes in 'troubled teens' ages 12 through 18.

They typically have 50 students enrolled at one time and accept both teen boys and girls and have been operating for over a decade.

Kids are sent to the academy from all over the country by their families in hopes of getting their children on the right path.

Many of the children have been expelled from school, have troubled childhoods and struggle with severe mental health issues.

The academy in Whitmore is now under fire after nearly two dozen women who attended and worked at River View and spoke with BuzzFeed News and told them that staff at River View Christian Academy restricted students' communication with parents, took kids off of antidepressants cold turkey, prohibited girls from speaking for days or weeks at a time, failed to report allegations of abuse and disciplined students for attempting to kill themselves.

The report detailing these allegations was published by Buzzfeed in September of 2018.

Since the report was published, the state has begun taking action against the school.

According to court documents, the California Department of Social Services received several complaints over the past decade about River View but didn't have enough information to take action against the academy until the Buzzfeed report was published in late 2018.

California's Social Services Department started interviewing former River View students after Buzzfeed's report and called the school posing as a parent interested in enrolling their child at the facility to get more information.

On January 8, 2019, the state got a warrant to raid River View Christian Academy and sent a team of 16 California Highway Patrol officers and 17 social workers to campus.

Records show that the department had evidence that River View staff members stored handguns and AR-15-style rifles on campus.

The Director of River View Academy told KRCR they do not store handguns and AR-15-style rifles.

During the raid, no weapons were found but state officials interviewed 29 current students who raised many of the same concerns that were first detailed in the Buzzfeed News story in September of 2018.

The students claimed they couldn't call 911 if they had to report an emergency or abuse and say they were forced to stand outside at night in the cold for a half hour if they misbehaved, and had their shoes confiscated.

Students reported to the state agents that they'd been forced to eat only peanut butter sandwiches for up to six months at a time as a punishment.

At least two students told state investigators that when they were physically sick, staff members gave them essential oils or "home remedies" instead of traditional medical care, according to sworn declarations filed by the state; this is all according to court documents.

One of the biggest allegations is that the academy is anti-gay and punishes students who have homosexual tendencies.

The Director of the Academy says they keep the girls and boys separate at all times. In an interview with KRCR on Thursday, the Director said:

We don't normally take a kid that outright claims to be gay because why would we take a girl that claims to be gay and put her in a dorm with a bunch of girls.

The director denied punishing students for being gay but stated they simply don't host teenagers at their facility who openly admit being a part of the LGBTQ+ community prior to attending.

The Director also says she is disgusted by the inflammatory allegations reported by BuzzFeed.

"Disgusting is an understatement for having your name and your place being tied to anything with the word abusive in it," said the Director, who does not want to use her name.

There is a heavy emphasis on faith-based teachings.

Being gay is a sin under a variety of religious institutions including Christianity.

The school bills itself as a place where parents can send kids who are *going down the wrong path*. It's run by a small nonprofit called Teen Rescue, which emphasizes that it holds socially conservative views. The school said that it doesn't employ any psychologists, counselors, psychiatrists, nurses, or social workers and students say there are no teachers on staff.

River View Christian Academy maintains it is a Christian boarding school but the paperwork that parents must sign, which is now part of the court record, stipulates that it is a program for "at-risk youth and their first priority is dealing with core issues of oppositional behavior."

Students and staff told KRCR that they graduate out of River View's program is based on behaviors and not academics.

The Director says that they work with the individual student's parents to determine when they are ready to graduate.

Some students are there for a couple months while others stay throughout their high school career.

They are enrolled in online academic classes to get their high school diplomas and are taught life-skills and coping skills in the classroom setting.

Mackenzie Williams, a student who attended the school for eight months starting in June of 2018, was visiting the campus on Thursday and told KRCR that the academy changed the course of her life for the better.

"None of those things [allegations] ever happened and its not an abusive place in any form. Not physically, not emotionally, not verbally. I've never seen a shock collar on a dog, much less the kids here," said Williams.

Williams says she was sent to the school by her parents after a series of behavioral issues and mental health problems.

"I think everyone at some point wants to go home. It's the same with college or any other experience, where you're away from home," said Williams. "Its hard because you can't communicate with your parents all the time but its for your own personal benefit."

Students and staff say the distance and disconnection from the kid's parents help them to grow as a person.

The staff say the parents are allowed to visit the campus once a month and are in constant communication with the staff to see how their child is doing.

The academy is still operating but after the raid in January, the California Department of Social Services determined that "youth's rights are likely being violated and that [River View's] staff engage in conduct that is a risk to the health, welfare or safety of youth in care".

The Department of Social Services has determined that because the staff controlled every aspect of the children's lives on campus, it needs to have a community care license.

Currently, the academy is operating under a private school license and because private institutions don't use taxpayer money, the state has not been involved up until this controversy.

The state began to fine River View \$200 a day in April for not having a community care license.

River View Christian Academy has failed to pay the fines and continues to be charged daily.

As a result of this, the California Attorney General's office filed a complaint in court asking a state judge to order the school shut down because the owner of the academy, Phil Ludwig, told the government he refused to license the facility through the Social Services Department.

In order for River View to comply with new state regulations, it would have to violate their religious convictions, which treat being gay as a sin.

Former Governor Jerry Brown enacted a new law in 2016 that bans facilities like River View Christian Academy from making efforts to "eliminate or reduce sexual or romantic attractions or feelings toward individuals of the same sex," and requires them to submit documentation to the state showing that employees had been trained in LGBT sensitivity.

Since the academy is private school and takes no public funding, the state notes it can turn away any student.

In addition, private facilities are not subject to any federal regulations.

River View Christian Academy continues to avoid paying fines and attorneys for the academy argue the state law that California's government is using to regulate the facility infringes on its religious rights.

The academy filed a lawsuit in March challenging the statute's constitutionality.

Meanwhile the California Attorney General's Office has filed a motion for a state judge to shut the academy down.

River View Christian Academy is no stranger to controversy after a former student turned staff member secretly delivered her own baby and then left the child for dead on campus in 2011.

The department got a warrant to inspect River View after the dead baby incident but nothing came of it for the school - although the woman who did it was arrested.

The legal battle regarding allegations of abuse and being anti-gay is continuing to unfold between River View Christian Academy and the state.

As of the publishing date of this article, River View Christian Academy is still open.



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