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Boot camp youth dies of thirst after forced exercise; 8 indicted

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"Our entire staff is heart broken and full of grief."

Those are the words from the ministry administrator at the Hope Youth Ranch in Webster Parish.

Eight former and current ranch employees were indicted Monday on charges surrounding the death of Alex Harris, a thirteen year old boy their care.

The death is reminding people of recent national tragedies involving young children sent to youth camps.

In this case, the charge does not imply intent. In other words the accused did not intend to kill the boy, but they did nothing to stop it.

The charge against the eight accused is negligent homicide. The allegation is denying a young boy a drink of water after making him run for bad behavior.

"Any reasonable person would have been able to see there was something wrong on that day," says Louisiana State Police Detective Michael Allen.

The day was September 2005. **Numerous times that day, investigators say the thirteen year old begged for water, complained of pain, and even tried to drink from water fountain before allegedly being dragged away from it.** [Emphasis added]

"What the coroner told us, a little bit of water and this kid would be alive," said Bossier-Webster District Attorney, Schuyler Marvin. [Emphasis added]

The case differs from a recent one in Florida where a young boy died in a boot camp. A video tape shows guards apparently beating the boy. The first autopsy found the death to be unrelated to the beating, but a second one cited criminal negligence. Now, Florida's Governor is demanding action.

"There was no other reason for his death other than negligent treatment of him according to the coroner. He did not have any other health problems," says Marvin.

Marvin says he does not believe any of eight accused went to work that day intending to kill, but he blames all eight of them for not stepping in and stopping what he calls a preventable death for a troubled teen who needed help, in more than one way.

Ranch ministry administrator Roy Martinez says the ranches mission is unchanged.

"There are still hurting children here and throughout this state. We will continue to use one hundred percent of our resources and efforts to make a difference in the lives of hurting young men.

All eight indicted are out of jail on bond awaiting arraignment.

Indicted were

- Marcus Jones, 24, of Castor
- Tasha Jackson, 29, of Haynesville
- Jeremy Blanks, 22, of Minden
- Troy Hamilton, 31, of Homer
- Kelton Greenard, 26, of Minden
- Arthur Henderson II, 24, of Cotton Valley
- Willis Doyle, 48, of Castor
- Anthony Combs, 38, of Ruston

Hope Youth Ranch is a private, nonprofit, Christian-based organization for boys. It receives state funding because the juveniles in its care are either foster children or have been sent there by state juvenile authorities.

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