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Troubled NW Missouri boot camp suing one of its most vocal critics

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Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. - A northwest Missouri boot camp that's facing a wrongful death lawsuit for the death of a 15-year-old California boy is suing one of its most vocal critics for causing "irreparable harm" to the institution.

Thayer Learning Center, a military-type home for about 100 troubled teens in Kidder, filed the suit last week against former employee Timothy J. Rocha for breaching a signed employment agreement that stated he would not "divert, take away ... or interfere with any present or future customer."

Rocha, who earned $9 an hour as a "sergeant," worked at Thayer from Aug. 28, 2004, until he was fired about two weeks later. The lawsuit seeks more than $75,000 in damages.

Thayer claims Rocha has contacted customers and attempted to steer them away from Thayer, and has "successfully diverted away many potential customers."

The lawsuit says Thayer "has experienced a significant decrease in revenues" because of Rocha's actions. An accompanying document puts those losses in the "thousands of dollars" and says the school "is in danger of losing more."

Rocha has been an outspoken critic of the camp, saying he was stunned by what he thought were abusive practices.

He filed two reports of child abuse with the Caldwell County sheriff's office in September, claiming a student had been placed in "half a chokehold" and that a Thayer employee then sat on the student's legs.

In a Dec. 19 story in The Kansas City Star, Rocha said he was troubled by some of the actions he says he saw during his brief tenure at the facility.

"By the second day, I was telling my wife, 'This isn't right,'" he said in that story.

Thayer officials say the allegations of child abuse are "ludicrous and false."

Rocha is listed as a witness in a state investigative report conducted after 15-year-old Roberto Reyes died Nov. 3 of what an autopsy report said were the likely complications of a spider or insect bite.

His parents sued the center, three employees and a referral service in February, alleging that physical exertion and abuse caused or contributed to the teen's death.