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Death of boy in Missouri stands out in GAO report

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WASHINGTON — Congressional investigators found numerous allegations of abuse at youth "boot camps" across the country, including evidence of mistreatment in the death of a 15-year-old boy at a Missouri program in 2004, they told a House committee Wednesday.

Of the 10 deaths closely examined by the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, lead investigator Greg Kutz called the Missouri case "one of the three worst."

"Ineffective program management played a key role in most of these deaths," the GAO's Kutz testified.

A coroner's autopsy report said Roberto Reyes, of Santa Rosa, Calif., died from rhabdomyolysis, or the breakdown of muscle fibers and the release of fibers into the bloodstream, resulting from a spider bite less than a week after arriving at Thayer Learning Center.

The GAO report presented to a congressional committee for a hearing Wednesday also said Roberto endured abuse after complaining of illness and was denied medical care.

Criminal charges were never filed, even though a state investigation found evidence of staff neglect and concluded medical treatment might have saved Roberto's life.

The findings in the Thayer case prompted a call for the Justice Department to examine the fatality and why local agencies declined to file charges. The request came from Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., chairman of the House Education and Resources committee. He also asserted during a hearing that conditions in many residential treatment programs designed to prove "tough love" for troubled teens are "inhumane."

"This nightmare has remained an open secret for years," Miller said. "Sporadic news accounts of specific incidents have built a record that should never have been ignored, but shamefully was."

The coroner in Missouri's Caldwell County at the time of Roberto's death said his autopsy concluded that the death was an accident and that the boy could have been bitten before he arrived at the camp.

The GAO report presented to the committee said Roberto had more than 30 cuts and bruises on his body when he died. The staff had interpreted Roberto's symptoms — including falling down frequently, complaining of muscle soreness, vomiting and involuntarily urinating and defecating on himself — as rebellion.

After complaining of illness, the boy was forced to the ground and held there on several occasions, according to the report. Once, he had a 20-pound sandbag tied around his neck when he was too sick to exercise.

Roberto was placed in the "sick bay" the morning of the day he died, where a staff member checked on him at midafternoon and found he had no pulse. The staff then called 911, and the boy was taken to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

A state investigation found that Roberto might have survived if he had earlier medical attention and that records at the camp may have been falsified. No criminal charges were ever filed, though the boy's parents

filed a wrongful death lawsuit that was settled out of court for about $1 million, according to the GAO.

Thayer Learning Center did not immediately return a phone call seeking comment on the report.

PARENTS TESTIFY

The committee heard testimony from three parents of children whose boot camp deaths were among 10 cases examined in the report:

— Ryan Lewis, 14, of East Longmeadow, Mass., suffered from clinical depression and committed suicide while at a camp in West Virginia, even after he had cut his arm with a camp-issued pocket knife and pleaded with counselors to let him leave in July 2002.

— Erica Harvey, 15, of California, died from heatstroke while hiking during her the first day of a program in Oregon in May 2002.

— Aaron Bacon, 16, of Phoenix, lost 20 percent of his body weight while at a Utah program. He collapsed and died after being denied food and water in 113-degree heat.

"Aaron's bloody and tattered journal would contain no poetry, but would record in his own words an unbelievable account of torture, abuse and neglect," his father, Bob Bacon, said at the hearing.

The GAO said it was not passing judgment on all boot camp programs and is taking a broader look for a report to be released early next year.

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