

THE SPOKESMAN REVIEW

GENERAL AND COMMERCIAL NEWSPAPER OF SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

102ND EDITION

Boys ranches lose contracts after inquiry

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Staff writer

State officials announced Friday they will cease placing boys at two group homes in Pend Oreille County, and remove boys already placed there.

During a meeting just before the announcement, the officials informed attorneys for the two ranches that contracts governing placement of boys at the facilities will be discontinued.

The action follows a special judicial inquiry into J-Bar-D Boys Ranch at Lone and Reynolds Creek Boys Ranch near Cusick. The probe involved allegations of substandard care and abuse.

Superior Court Judge Slaney R. Buckley had said last week that "a serious question exists as to the continued use by the state of these facilities."

A dozen boys at the J-Bar-D will be removed within 30 days, and the 23 boys at Reynolds Creek will be gone in 60 days, said Roy Harrington, regional director for the Division of Children and Family Services of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).

Harrington said he is asking regional directors throughout the state to help locate facilities where the boys can be sent.

"We feel at this point, this is the only alternative we've got," Harrington said. "I feel there is a track record with J-Bar-D and Reynolds Creek, and we don't want to ignore it. We can't ignore it."

He said both ranches failed to maintain the type of care and treat-

ment outlined in the contracts.

"We think there has been a history established of their neglect to attend to those issues stated in the contracts," Harrington said.

Under the contracts, the non-profit organizations running the ranches received about \$1,200 a month for each boy. In addition to housing the boys, the ranches were to provide education, counseling, therapy, recreation and family treatment.

Noting the Division of Children and Family Services was formed earlier this year, Harrington said, "The public's got a right to expect this new division to perform."

In July, Buckley launched the judicial inquiry at the request of the Pend Oreille County sheriff and prosecuting attorney following allegations of sexual misconduct among boys at the J-Bar-D.

At the same time Sheriff Tony Bamonte reported that boys at the Reynolds Creek ranch were under suspicion in connection with burglaries in the Cusick area. He said his office had investigated problems at both ranches over several months.

Within several days, DSHS officials announced their own investigations of ranch operations and of the role of state employees in overseeing laws and contracts pertaining to the ranches.

Harrington said Friday a draft report of a fiscal audit ordered last summer shows no money was missappropriated at the ranches. However, the audit did uncover

(Continued on page 5)

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Boys—(Continued from page 1)

some financial problems, and those are being addressed, he said.

The regional director said the audit findings will not be released until ranch officials are given a chance to comment. A meeting has been set for next month.

State officials still are evaluating the performance of DSHS employees responsible for monitoring the two ranches in the past few years, said Shirley Goins, state division director.

Administrators of the ranches have a right to appeal the decision not to renew the contracts, Harrington said. Attorneys representing the ranches indicated Friday an appeal may be filed, he said.

The attorneys, Greg Devlin and Pete Johnson, both of Spokane, and ranch officials could not be reached for comment late Friday.

Dave Goodwin, former director of the J-Bar-D and owner of the ranch property at Lone, was quoted in a news story Wednesday in the Newport Miner as saying the findings in Buckley's inquiry were "garbage" and were based on angry lies by boys who wanted to get even for being sent to a group home.

Barnonte said Friday that DSHS documents in many cases corroborated the testimony of witnesses at the inquiry.

Buckley said in the findings that "the kindest description that can be given to the J-D facility . . . is that it was substandard."

The judge found that improper or inadequate supervision permitted older boys to pick on younger boys in front of the staff; that fights occurred between residents; that residents were tied to trees and beaten by other residents; and that there

were sexual assaults by residents against other residents, as well as homosexual acts between residents.

"The correction methods used were, in many instances, inappropriate and violent," Buckley said.

Facilities were dirty and meals were not adequate, the judge found. In addition, cases of abuse and assault were not reported to authorities as required by state law, he said, citing 17 incidents reported to his special inquiry.

Under the J-Bar-D contract, social workers were to provide 17.4 hours of counseling each month with a half-hour of one-on-one consultation for each boy conducted by a social worker holding advanced training in behavioral science.

Buckley said evidence indicated little or no counseling took place.

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