

Assaulted girls' moms sue treatment center

The Oaks in South Austin was negligent in caring for children, lawsuit contends

By Monica Polanco

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

The parents of two girls who said their children were raped at a treatment center for troubled youth have sued the center.

In a civil lawsuit filed Wednesday in

state District Court in Travis County, the girls' mothers accuse the Oaks Treatment Center of being negligent in appointing a 19-year-old man to supervise the shower and dormitory facilities for teenage girls. The center also failed to properly screen, hire and supervise employees and did not provide enough security and safeguards for patients, the lawsuit contends.

"It's a lot worse because these girls were there to get help for emotional and psychological issues," said John

Thomas, a lawyer representing one of the girls. "And it's kind of like a boat coming up on a castaway on the ocean and throwing them a life-preserver with rocks in it."

The center, at 1407 W. Stassney Lane in South Austin, is part of the Brown Schools, a network of therapeutic programs for troubled children found throughout the United States.

The Brown School Behavioral

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SUIT: Treatment center lied, parents contend

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Health System, its owners, McCown De Leeuw & Co. and Psychiatric Solutions Inc. — a Tennessee company that owns the Oaks Treatment Center — also have been sued. Representatives for the company could not be reached for comment.

Wednesday's lawsuit is not the first time the Brown Schools has been surrounded by controversy. Chase Moody, a 17-year-old who was enrolled in a camp in Mason County, died Oct. 14 after he was restrained by at least three camp staff members because of what the company described as a violent outburst.

The On Track program was cited for 28 violations of state standards in connection with Moody's death. The company appealed. A criminal investigation is ongoing.

Edward Johnson, the 19-year-old man named in the lawsuit, pleaded guilty in one of the cases in state District Court in June to indecency with a child by contact, a second-degree felony, and was sentenced to five years in prison.

The second case is still

pending. The girls' names and the names of their mothers were withheld because of the nature of the crime.

Howard Falkenberg, a spokesman for the Brown Schools, said the company would study the lawsuit.

"We regret any time there's an accusation or an incident of this type" Falkenberg said. "These matters aren't always quite as they seem, so you have to be careful in working them through."

The lawsuit claims officials at the Oaks Treatment Center lied to one of the mothers, who lives in Alaska, when they told her that no current or former Oaks employees had ever had a history of physical or sexual abuse and that there had been no abuse at the Oaks or any of the Brown Schools.

Those statements were false, the lawsuit contends, because at least one former employee of the Oaks had a history of committing physical and sexual abuse and youths had been abused at the Brown Schools' facilities.

The lawsuit seeks reimbursement for mental anguish and medical expenses but does not specify an amount.

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