

Lawsuit Seeks to End Abuse of Girls in Mississippi Reform School

July 11, 2007—Troubled teenage girls in a state-run reform school in Mississippi have suffered “horrendous” physical and sexual abuse, according to a lawsuit filed in federal court today. The [complaint](#) asks the court to require the state to provide federally required mental health and rehabilitative treatment to girls confined in the Columbia Training School.

The Bazelon Center joined the Mississippi Youth Justice Project (MYJP), a project of the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), and Robert B. McDuff, a civil rights attorney in Jackson, in filing the lawsuit on behalf of six girls ranging in age from 13 to 17. All suffer from mental illnesses and all were committed to Columbia for non-violent offenses. Most are victims of past physical or sexual abuse.

The lawsuit alleges that:

- In an apparent response to unsubstantiated allegations that they planned to escape, five of the plaintiffs were shackled around their ankles for 12 hours a day for periods ranging from eight days to a month. They had to eat, attend school, use the bathroom, participate in recreational activities and visit with their families while wearing the painful shackles.
- One girl was sexually assaulted by a male employee of the facility while she was confined in a segregated area. She reported the assault but was never informed of the results of an investigation and never received counseling to help her deal with the trauma.
- Three of the girls cut themselves while on suicide watch. None of them received any psychological help during their isolation. No attempt was made to stabilize their moods, and staff members failed to perform periodic checks to ensure their safety. One girl was placed in a cell alone for 14 hours, during which time she carved the words “HATE ME” into her forearm. One sliced her wrists with glass, and another sliced her wrists on the edge of her concrete bunk.

Most of the girls at Columbia suffer from mental disorders. And more than half were sent there for nonviolent offenses such as shoplifting, running away, disorderly conduct and other minor offenses. Most could be treated far more effectively – at half the cost – in community-based programs that focus on rehabilitation and mental health treatment. The state spends \$5 million a year to house an average of 60 girls at Columbia.

Mississippi Protection and Advocacy Inc., a congressionally authorized nonprofit organization that enforces the civil rights of people with disabilities, is also a plaintiff in the suit.

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