

CRIME & POLICE

Lawsuit: Teen Sold Into Sex Slavery by Keys Children's Shelter Employee

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By Jessica Lipscomb | April 13, 2016

On a Friday in late March 2012, an exasperated mother drove her teenage daughter to the Florida Keys Children's Shelter in Tavernier, a residential program with room for up to 18 kids on the island of Key Largo. By all accounts, it was a difficult ride. Twice, the girl tried to jump out of the car. In the parking lot, she threatened to kill herself if her mother admitted her to the facility.

The girl, a chronic runaway who had just turned 17 three weeks earlier, had a history of mental health issues, drug use, and sexual abuse. Earlier that day, before arriving at the shelter, she had been ordered into state custody — things were so bad at home that the teen's mother said she simply couldn't care for her anymore.

But things were about to get worse. Over a period of two months, the girl ran away from the shelter an astonishing eight times, only to be sent right back to the facility each time she was recovered.

On June 1, 2012, when she returned to the shelter after her eighth escape, a staffer offered to help her run away once more. Instead — the girl and her family now say — that employee sold the teen into a sex-trafficking ring, where she was forced into prostitution for 41 days, held against her will by captors who threatened to kill her, and eventually contracted a sexually transmitted disease.

Those are the brutal allegations in a lawsuit filed on the now-21-year-old's behalf in federal court March 30 by Fort Lauderdale attorney Howard Talenfeld. The suit accuses the shelter, as well as Wesley House Family Services and Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe, of negligence in failing to place the teen in a secure facility, to get her the psychiatric care she required, and to have her taken into protective custody under the state's Baker Act following two suicide threats.

As of this week, none of the three organizations has filed a response to the suit in court. A spokeswoman from Our Kids tells *New Times* the organization generally doesn't comment

on pending matters. Julio Torrado, board chairman of Wesley House, also declined to comment at length.

“A copy of the summons is currently being reviewed by legal counsel, and we’re awaiting their decision before making any other comments at this time,” he said.

Ben Kemmer, an executive officer at the Florida Keys Children’s Shelter, said he had been advised by the shelter’s lawyers not to comment.

The lawsuit outlines a series of red flags. In an assessment May 4, a professional evaluator expressed concern that if the teen continued to stay at the shelter, she “was at significant risk of sexual exploitation and harm.” That day, the girl ran away for the fifth time and was discovered May 5 in Miami “with known criminals,” the lawsuit alleges. Still, the teen was placed right back in the same shelter.

On May 7, another report was issued, saying the teen needed to be put in a locked psychiatric residential treatment program due to a pattern of “chaotic, impulsive, and reckless behavior.” The evaluation said the girl had poor insight and an inability to protect herself in relationships with others.

On May 22, a dependency judge ordered the teen to be placed in a psychiatric residential services facility. While at the hearing, she ran away from the courthouse, her seventh time escaping from custody. Wesley House staffers found her the same day but again returned her to the Florida Keys Children’s Shelter in violation of the judge’s order, the lawsuit claims.

Last fall, one of the shelter’s staff mentors, 29-year-old Ricky Atkins, was convicted of child sex trafficking and **sentenced to more than 31 years in federal prison**. Court testimony revealed that Atkins had taken two girls, ages 15 and 16, from the shelter to a hotel in Cutler Bay, where he left them with a woman who forced the teens into prostitution. **Text messages** showed that the woman, 24-year-old Sandra Simon, who was sentenced to 11 years in prison, supervised the girls’ prostitution and that Atkins collected their earnings.

The newly filed lawsuit does not name the staffer at the Florida Keys Children’s Shelter, so it’s unclear if the cases are related. In the criminal case, the two victims were trafficked in 2014, while the plaintiff in the lawsuit says she was trafficked two years earlier. Reached this week, Talenfeld declined to comment on the pending litigation.