

## Children's shelter didn't protect girl from sex trafficking, lawsuit says

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Florida Keys Children's Shelter KeysInfoNet

A 17-year-old girl was sold to a human trafficking ring in 2012 by a staff member of the Florida Keys Children's Shelter, which along with two other nonprofits failed to offer her the help she clearly needed, according to a federal lawsuit.

During 41 days of captivity, the teen was forced into prostitution and sex with her captors, who threatened to murder her and her family if she tried to escape or refused their orders, forced to take drugs and contracted a sexually transmitted disease, say attorneys Stacie Schmerling and Howard Talenfeld.

The lawsuit names no shelter staff members but comes months after former shelter mentor Ricky Atkins was sentenced to 32 years in prison for child sex trafficking of two girls who were 15 and 16 the summer of 2014. For three years, Atkins had worked at the same Tavernier shelter central to the federal lawsuit. Schmerling wouldn't answer questions

about the 52-page lawsuit, including whether Atkins was involved in these allegations. The suit claims the shelter and two other nonprofits continued to allow the teen to stay at the emergency shelter in Tavernier despite her running away eight times in two months. For the girl, the shelter was a "dangerous placement that could not protect [her] from harm" the attorneys wrote.

"FKCS blatantly ignored and/or deliberately failed to learn of the plethora of red flags, dangers and warning signs that [the teen's] needs were not being properly assessed and provided for," states the lawsuit filed March 30 in U.S. District Court in Miami on behalf of someone identified only as Victim.

Both the Fort Lauderdale-based Talenfeld Law firm and Horan, Wallace and Higgins firm in Key West represent the plaintiff, who is now 21.

Bill Mann, co-chief executive officer of the shelter, said the nonprofit's attorneys, Vernis and Bowling, advised him not to comment. In addition to the children's shelter, the lawsuit names as defendants Wesley House Family Services and Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe Inc. Julio Torrado, chairman of Wesley House's board of directors, said Monday the agency's lawyers are reviewing the summons and he can't comment yet. None of the defendants had filed responses to the lawsuit as of Tuesday. The case is assigned to U.S. District Court Judge Jose Martinez.