


FLORIDA KEYS

Children's shelter to settle lawsuit over sex trafficking

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Florida Keys Children's Shelter

The Florida Keys Children's Shelter and two other Monroe County nonprofits will settle out of court a federal lawsuit claiming the agencies failed to protect a 17-year-old girl from being sold into sex trafficking.

Our Kids of Miami/Monroe and Wesley House Family Services were also named in the suit, filed March 30, 2016, in U.S. District Court in Miami on behalf of the girl.

Details of the settlement were not filed in the public record but mediator Rodney Max said the case was successfully mediated between April 4 and 11. "Please note that attorneys have done an outstanding job in achieving resolution of this case while representing the best interests of their clients," Max wrote in his April 12 report to the court. The suit claimed the defendants continued to allow the teen to stay at the emergency shelter in Tavernier despite her running away eight times in two months. The shelter was a "dangerous" place "that could not protect [her] from harm," 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. The teen 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, the suit claimed. 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 named no shelter staff members but arrived 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.