

LEGISLATORS REACT TO SHOCKING 'PRANK'

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Legislators demand immediate action following news that local students were mistakenly subjected to repeated electric shocks

Senator Brian A. Joyce and Representative John W. Scibak today called for immediate state action following reports that three students at the Canton-based Judge Rotenberg Center school were subjected to repeated electric shock treatments as part of a prank.

The Washington Examiner reported Friday that the episode is part of a state criminal investigation focused on the Judge Rotenberg Center, said officials close to the case. According to sources, the Massachusetts investigation of the incident began this summer after a student at the center called staff and pretended to be center founder Matthew and said he wanted the three students, one of them a child from Virginia, hooked up to electrodes. One of the students was shocked 29 times. The other two were shocked 77 times each, documents show and sources said.

In a letter to Governor Patrick, Senator Joyce and Representative Scibak said they were very concerned by the report and asked for quick state action to ensure that the use of shock therapy be better regulated by the state.

"In a word this incident is horrifying and it would be immoral for the Legislature and the Executive branch not to react strongly and swiftly", said Senator Joyce who has sponsored legislation to ban electric shock therapy in the past.

"I can think of no clearer argument for the immediate passage of legislation that would substantially limit the use of shock therapy in Massachusetts," said Representative Scibak who, along with Senator Joyce, has sponsored legislation to regulate the use of aversive therapy in Massachusetts, and set a higher standard for those who use the controversial therapy.

The prank was allegedly videotaped and the videos were viewed by a state investigator, but sources have reported that the tapes were subsequently destroyed.

The report is on the heels of a scathing investigative piece published in September by the national magazine *Mother Jones* on the Judge Rotenberg Center. In the cover story, the reporter, who spent a year researching the article, refers to the schools as a high school version of Abu Ghraib and describes heartbreaking stories of children (some as young as 9-years-old) being painfully shocked by accident, shocked for swearing or being shocked over decades for the same behavior.

Eight states (including Massachusetts) send children with autism, mental retardation, ADD, ADHD and emotional problems to the school that punishes them with food deprivation and powerful electric shocks. JRC currently treats about 230 children and brings in annual revenues exceeding \$56 million.

Following its own internal investigation last summer, the New York officials voted to prohibit the use of electric shock therapy on students, nearly half of whom are from New York state. In the report, the New York Board of Regents determined that the Judge Rotenberg Center was not sufficiently trained to oversee the treatment of children with challenging emotional and behavioral problems and that skin shocks were used for relatively minor behaviors such as nagging and failing to keep a neat appearance. Officials in D.C. are also trying to remove their nine students from the facility.

Senator Joyce and Representative Scibak have filed two bills that will be heard by the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities on January 16th to delineate a very narrow range of behavior problems where aversive therapy may be used.

The bills are the culmination of hundreds of hours of work and discussions between behavior analysts and the psychological community, legislators, and disability and civil rights advocates.

"We believe that it is government's fundamental duty to protect our most innocent and vulnerable populations," said Senator Joyce noting that prominent behavior-modification experts, including some cited by Matt Israel, call the JRC ineffective and outmoded. The school is in Senator Joyce's district.

"This legislation will regulate the unfettered practice of aversive therapy," added Representative Scibak, former Director of Psychology at Belchertown State School and a licensed psychologist. "Action needs to be taken now to ensure that no individual is subjected to years of continuous aversive therapy without the benefit of regular oversight and review by a group of qualified psychologists."