

**LAWYER LAYS BLAME IN BOY'S MOLESTATION: OWNERS OF A SAN BERNARDINO GROUP HOME ARE MOST LIABLE FOR THE 1999 INCIDENTS, HE ARGUES IN COURT.**

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SAN BERNARDINO

Owners of a San Bernardino group home and school for severely mentally disturbed children should be held most accountable for the sexual molestation of one of their young residents, an attorney told jurors Monday.

*Victor Treatment* Centers Inc., which owns North Valley School and Chaparral Treatment Center in San Bernardino, failed to detect the repeated molestations or properly discipline the teacher's aide who was responsible, said attorney Jack Anthony, who is representing the molestation victim in a civil lawsuit against the centers.

Steve Ayala, who worked at the group home and school, pleaded guilty to a string of molestations in 1999 and was sentenced to six years in state prison.

Anthony accused treatment center officials of engaging in a "cover-up" to hide the molestation from investigators after the male victim, then 11, complained to his parents of rectal bleeding.

Attorney Timothy Stafford, who is defending *Victor Treatment* Centers against the lawsuit, told jurors that Ayala was careful to keep the molestation secret from his supervisors, who therefore were unable to intervene until the allegations surfaced.

"No one at Chaparral (House) tried to cover up anything," Stafford told the jury. "Were they slow in responding to some things that happened? Perhaps."

Anthony asked the jury to award the 13-year-old boy \$2 million for emotional damage as a result of the molestation and \$494,250 to pay for counseling that doctors say he will need in his lifetime.

If liability is broken up among the three defendants in the civil case, Anthony suggested the jury hold *Victor Treatment* Centers and North Valley School each 40 percent responsible and Ayala 20 percent responsible for the molestation.

Stafford estimated that the boy's future medical bills would total \$252,000 and told jurors all the blame for the molestation should fall firmly on Ayala.

"He lied to (his supervisors); he lied to the police department," Stafford said. "He kept it a secret, just between him and (his victim)."

The molestation by Ayala was particularly harmful to the boy because the counselor and teacher's aide was an authority figure to whom the troubled boy felt comfortable talking about his problems, Anthony said.

"This was a person he was coming out of his shell to open up to," Anthony told the jury.

Jurors began deliberating the case Monday afternoon and were expected to resume today.

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