

\$2.7 MILLION IN ABUSE DAMAGES: SAN BERNARDINO MOLESTATION CIVIL TRIAL JURY ADDS \$1.5 MILLION IN PUNITIVE COSTS TO ITS EARLIER AWARD.

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Tim Grenda
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SAN BERNARDINO

A day after awarding \$1.2 million in compensatory damages to a boy molested at a group home for mentally disordered children, a jury Thursday slapped the owners and a former counselor with another \$1.5 million in punitive damages.

The \$2.7 million in total damages was awarded to the victim, now 13, in a civil lawsuit filed against **Victor Treatment Centers**, the nonprofit corporation that owns North Valley School and the Bronson House in San Bernardino, where the abuse occurred two years ago.

Another defendant in the suit, Steven Ayala, is the former teacher's aide at North Valley School and youth counselor at the Bronson House who pleaded guilty to sodomizing the boy on several occasions. He was sentenced to six years in state prison.

The jury of seven women and five men deliberated for about an hour Thursday afternoon before reaching their financial verdicts, which ended the trial.

"I'm very pleased the jury did what they did," said attorney Jack Anthony, who represented the boy in the lawsuit. "The (victim's) family wanted enough money to pay for his continuing treatment. Certainly, we've done more than that."

The jurors ruled that **Victor Treatment Centers Inc.** should pay \$1 million of the punitive damages and North Valley Schools, where Ayala and the boy met, should pay \$450,000.

Ayala, who, a financial expert testified, may never earn more than \$9 an hour once he is released from prison, was ordered to pay \$65,000 in punitive damages.

In his closing argument, Anthony had urged the jurors to punish the owners of **Victor Treatment Centers** for allowing the sexual abuse of a seriously mentally ill child placed in their care. An attorney for **Victor Treatment Centers** argued that Ayala kept the abuse a secret, which kept the center from preventing the molestation.

"What we're asking you to do here is send a message, that there will be consequences if these children . . . are not treated with the respect they deserve," Anthony said.

Anthony had asked jurors to impose a financial penalty on **Victor Treatment Centers** that was 10 percent of the corporation's net worth of more than \$19 million. Such a penalty would have been approximately \$1.9 million.

Timothy Stafford, who represented **Victor Treatment Centers** and North Valley School in the lawsuit, argued that since the corporation is nonprofit and

funded mostly through government money, penalizing them financially would have little effect.

Victor Treatment Centers received more than \$8.1 million last fiscal year from government agencies to provide mental-health housing and treatment for the poor, officials said.

Zone: SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY ; EAST VALLEY

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