

MOLESTATION SUIT PARTIALLY SETTLED: CASE WILL PROCEED VS. RIALTO FACILITY'S OWNER

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SAN BERNARDINO

State and county lawyers have agreed to settle their portion of a civil lawsuit brought on behalf of three girls who were molested while living in a Rialto group home for mentally disordered teens, attorneys said.

The settlement was reached Thursday, one month before the case is scheduled to go to trial in a San Bernardino courtroom.

The attorney for the girls agreed to drop the state and county as defendants in exchange for government officials halting efforts to collect money for treatment services they claim they provided the molested victims.

State and county officials had placed liens on the victims seeking to collect some or all of the money, estimated in the thousands of dollars, from any monetary awards the victims would receive as a result of verdicts in the case.

The lawsuit, set to begin trial March 19, will proceed against **Victor Treatment Centers Inc.**, the Chico-based corporation that owns the Chestnut House treatment center where the molestations allegedly occurred in 1999.

"We think that the state and the county are much less culpable than the other defendants," said Jack Anthony, the Santa Ana attorney representing the three girls in their lawsuit.

Earlier this month, **Victor Treatment Centers** and other defendants were ordered by a jury to pay \$2.7 million in damages to a boy Anthony represented who was sodomized by a counselor at a San Bernardino group home and school.

The county contracts with **Victor Treatment Centers** for 24 treatment beds, which are reserved for the most severely disturbed children and teen-agers in the county's child-welfare system. The children were placed in the private home by juvenile court judges, officials said.

Dennis Popka, the San Bernardino attorney who represented the county in the lawsuit, said the settlement to release the county and state from the suit was acceptable to all sides.

"It's a good deal for everybody involved," Popka said Friday. "We're certainly happy with how it worked out."

Popka could not say how much money the county and state had sought from the victims for the services they provided to them, including housing, meals and education.

"It could be thousands of dollars we're talking about, depending on how long each of these kids have been in the system," Popka said.

A judge would have decided how much, if any, money the county and state

could have collected from the victims, Popka said.

The state had been named as a defendant because it was charged with licensing and inspecting the homes, officials said. A state attorney could not be reached for comment Friday.

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