

**Remarks of the Honorable George Miller
Chairman, House Education and Labor Committee
Markup of the Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs
for Teens Act Wednesday, February 12, 2009**

Good morning.

Today, our committee is considering legislation to stop child abuse in residential programs for teenagers.

This bill is almost exactly the same as a measure that won overwhelming bipartisan support in the full House last Spring. It builds on a two year investigation this committee conducted into the shocking abuse and neglect of teens at residential programs across the country.

I'd like to remind everyone of what we found. The Government Accountability Office uncovered thousands of cases and allegations of child abuse in recent years at teen residential programs. including therapeutic boarding schools, boot camps, wilderness camps, and behavior modification facilities. A number of these cases resulted in the death of a child.

Our committee heard stories about program staff members forcing children:

- to remain in so-called “stress” positions for hours at a time;
- to undergo extreme physical exertion without adequate food, water, or rest;
- to stand with bags over their heads and nooses around their necks in mock hangings;
- and to eat foods to which they are allergic, even as they get sick.

We heard from parents of children who died preventable deaths at the hands of untrained, uncaring staff members.

We heard from adults who attended these programs as teens about the physical and emotional abuse they witnessed and suffered.

We also learned about the weak patchwork of regulations governing teen residential programs.

It is estimated that tens of thousands of children are enrolled in residential programs. In many states, many of these programs operate with no meaningful oversight.

Parents often send their children to these programs when they feel they have exhausted their alternatives. They trust that these programs and their staff will be able to help children straighten their lives out.

In far too many cases, however, the very people entrusted with the safety, health, and welfare of these children are the ones who violate that trust in some of the most horrific ways imaginable.

The GAO also informed us about programs' irresponsible operating practices that put kids at risk, and about the deceitful marketing practices that programs use to lure parents desperate for help for their kids.

We know that there are many programs and people around the country who are committed to helping improve the lives of young people and who do good work every day.

But unfortunately, it can be extremely difficult for parents to tell the good programs from the bad.

The legislation before us today, H.R. 911, would help keep children safe in residential programs and help ensure that parents have the information they need to make safer choices for their kids.

The legislation requires the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to establish minimum standards and to enforce those standards.

Ultimately, however, states will be responsible for carrying out the work of this bill. The legislation calls upon the states, within three years, to take up the role of setting standards and enforcing them at all programs, both public and private.

The HHS and state standards would include prohibitions on the physical, sexual, and mental abuse of children.

The standards would require that programs provide children with adequate food, water and medical care.

They would require that programs have plans in place to handle medical emergencies.

They would also include new training requirements for program staff members, including training on how to identify and report child abuse.

The legislation requires HHS to set up a toll-free hotline for people to call to report abuse at these programs.

It also requires HHS to create a website with information about each program, so that parents can look to see if substantiated cases of abuse have occurred at a program that they are considering for their kids.

I'd like to thank Congresswoman McCarthy for her continued hard work and partnership in re-introducing this legislation.

This committee has a strong record of working together to put the safety of our children first.

As Bob Bacon, whose son Aaron died after being deprived of adequate food and water at a wilderness therapy program, told this committee last year, “The stories of Aaron’s death and the others who have died, or survived the abuses of these programs, are chilling reminders of the dangers of absolute power, and point out the extremely high risks we take in allowing these programs to operate without strict regulation and oversight.”

It’s time to a stop to this. Today, we are taking an important, common-sense step toward finally ending this culture of abuse and neglect that has put thousands of children in jeopardy.

I urge all of my colleagues to join us in supporting this critical measure.

Thank you.