

## Iowa 'Training School' — Rehabilitation, or Retribution?



Vinny Lloyd describes Boys State Training School as “extremely stressful,” with hours in isolation that haunt him even today. He credits his wife Katie for “staying with me and saving my life.”



Corbett Miller Hall at the Boys State Training School in Eldora, Iowa.

It’s been almost 10 years since Vinny Lloyd was in Boys State Training School in Eldora, Iowa — but it’s an experience he’s unlikely to forget any time soon.

“I think about my time in Eldora a couple of moments every week,” he reflects. While the boys live in cottages at the facility, Vinny describes it as “literally a prison for kids, and just like prison, we were serving out our sentences with little to no rehabilitation.”

Vinny was placed in Eldora, as it is known, for approximately a year — and far too much of that time, he says, was spent in solitary confinement.

“In my cottage, we were thrown into isolation for talking out of turn, not showering fast enough, or talking back,” Vinny tells Children’s Rights. “My first night was filled with anxiousness, claustrophobia, anger. ... after my first full day, the lack of human contact started to turn into depression.” Vinny says that his time in isolation “was even worse than average,” because he was not allowed to have his glasses. “I was almost completely blind for 23 out of 24 hours. There was a window looking out of the cell that I couldn’t even use because I couldn’t see.”

Unfortunately, the practice of putting boys in solitary confinement — which is well documented as being highly detrimental for youth whose brains are still developing — is alive and well at the facility. It was one of the factors that compelled Disability Rights Iowa (DRI) to join forces with partner organization Children’s Rights, Inc (CR). of New York and file *G.R. v. Foxhoven*, a federal class action lawsuit that alleges officials are knowingly employing unconstitutional and illegal practices at the Boys State Training School, causing lasting harm to youth with significant mental illnesses. This lawsuit was filed on November 27, 2017. DHS Director filed his answer on January 29, 2018. The suit continues to be actively litigated.

This complaint paints a grim picture of a facility that has no full-time licensed mental health professionals on staff.

Instead of providing the boys with treatment that is desperately needed, workers at Eldora rely heavily on potentially harmful psychotropic medications administered without appropriate oversight or consent — as well as solitary confinement and a 14-point mechanical restraint that fully immobilizes a child — to control boys who *typically have not been convicted of any crime*.

“Children with mental health needs should not be thrown in solitary confinement as punishment, or silenced with dangerous medications without proper oversight,” said Harry Frischer, lead counsel at Children’s Rights. “They require tailored psychological and therapeutic supports to have a real chance of growing into fully integrated, productive members of the community. The tactics employed at Eldora are archaic. They are also flat-out harmful and unlawful.”

DRI and CR assert that these boys, aged 12 to 19, do not receive care needed to fulfill the facility’s mission of providing “a program which focuses on appropriate developmental skills, treatment, placements and rehabilitation.”

These include boys like Jimmy\*, age 16, who has been diagnosed with a number of conditions and has reported auditory hallucinations. He began exhibiting suicidal ideations and behaviors at Eldora, but is consistently denied access to needed mental health services and instead is given psychotropic medications for treatment. Jimmy has been placed on suicide watch several times after harming himself while in solitary confinement. During a period of 11 months, Jimmy was placed in solitary 81 times for more than 580 hours, and he was subjected to restraints 22 times in 10 of those months.

Officials have been known to defend their actions, describing the boys as felons who are too violent or angry for other programs. It is a notion that DRI resolutely refutes. “Officials have had multiple opportunities to make changes, and yet they have brushed them aside as though these kids don’t count,” said Nathan Kirstein, attorney with Disability Rights Iowa. “The state is required to act as parent, but no responsible parent would treat a child as Eldora does. These youth are there for rehabilitation and treatment — but they receive the exact opposite.” The Department of Human Services official answer to the lawsuit is due to the court by January 26, 2018 unless they request an extension and it is granted by the court.

The impact of such treatment can last a lifetime — so much so that in January 2016, President Barack Obama announced a ban on solitary confinement for juvenile offenders in the federal prison system. “Adolescents are still developing in neurological, cognitive and emotional domains,” said Susan H. McDaniel, Ph.D., president of the American Psychological Association. “As a result, solitary confinement can have especially devastating consequences for them. It is associated with increased risk of self-mutilation, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, paranoia and aggression.”

Vinny concurs: “Being in solitary confinement has caused me to have anxiety issues, as well as claustrophobia that has carried into life today.” His wife Katie believes that Eldora was a contributing factor to Vinny’s immense anger and subsequent trouble making sound life decisions. “There’s not a doubt in my mind that being in solitary confinement has done some damage,” she says. When he left the facility, “his heart was the only thing that wasn’t completely broken.”

*\*Pseudonyms used to protect the identities of minor children.*