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Anchorage

Alaska families say their children were sexually abused at North Star psychiatric hospital

By Michelle Theriault Boots

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North Star Hospital in Anchorage on Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2022. (Bill Roth / ADN)

The family was desperate and North Star hospital in Anchorage seemed like the answer.

Their son, a sweet-natured 14-year-old who loves Legos and basketball, was in a state of bleak depression, his parents said. One afternoon, he took too many of the pills he had been prescribed and announced that he needed help. His dad first drove him to the emergency room in their Southeast Alaska community. They stayed at the hospital for days, trying to find a place in Alaska prepared to treat their son.

A bed became available at North Star Behavioral Health System, an Anchorage psychiatric hospital meant to treat severely mentally ill and behaviorally disruptive children and teenagers. The family jumped at the opportunity, even though their teenage son would be a flight away from home.

“I felt relieved,” the boy’s mother said. “I thought, OK, maybe this is going to help.”

The family’s hope, she said, was that he would learn coping skills in therapy and get on a medication regimen to regulate his moods.

But the boy’s time at North Star was shattering. In early September, he reported being sexually abused by another patient. His parents rushed to discharge him. A police investigation is open. His mother and father say the events at North Star profoundly unmoored their already fragile child.

“I put him up there for help. And now he’s two times worse than what he was,” his mother said. “I wish I had never sent him there.”

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The 14-year-old is not the only young patient to report being sexually victimized while hospitalized at North Star. In late September, a family from a small community in Alaska’s Interior filed a lawsuit against North Star alleging that their

11-year-old boy was sexually abused by another patient within days of being admitted in August 2021.

The Daily News is not publishing the names or hometown of either family in order to protect their privacy.

North Star did not answer questions posed by the Daily News, providing a statement instead.

“North Star Behavioral Health System engaged law enforcement and contacted appropriate state authorities upon learning of the allegations in question and is fully cooperating with the investigations as well as communicating with the parents of the respective patients,” CEO Anne Marie Lynch wrote in a statement Monday. “We are unable to provide additional information. Further, due to patient privacy laws, we cannot comment on specific individuals.”

The families have spoken out, in interviews with the Daily News and in a lawsuit, because they say the experiences of the two boys raise questions about the hospital’s ability to keep its most vulnerable patients safe from predatory behavior.

Targeted while alone

In both cases, the victims were allegedly targeted by other patients who cornered them while they were alone.

The circumstance speaks to inadequate supervision, said Michael Branson, an Anchorage attorney at the firm Ingaldson Fitzgerald who is representing the 11-year-old boy’s family in the civil lawsuit.

“The overarching, common problem at North Star seems to have been a staffing shortfall combined with a refusal to reduce the number of patients to a level that

the staff could keep safe,” Branson said.

North Star is one of the only places to offer hospital-level psychiatric care for adolescents in Alaska, and the only to offer [acute inpatient care](#) for kids under 13. Most of its patients are kids in the foster care system, though neither of the boys in this story were in state custody. Families often must choose between North Star or sending a child Outside to a psychiatric hospital. The hospital system, which has two campuses on DeBarr Road in Anchorage as well as a small facility in Palmer, is owned by Universal Health Services, a Pennsylvania-based behavioral health giant that owns hundreds of hospitals and boasts annual revenues of [\\$11 billion per year](#).

Over the past five fiscal years, the state of Alaska’s Denali KidCare program paid the three North Star campuses a total of \$122 million in reimbursements for care, according to data from the Alaska Department of Health. The hospitals admit children as young as 4 and as old as 18.

Recently, the hospital failed [federal inspections](#) for patient-on-patient assaults, overuse of locked “seclusion rooms” and escapes, among other issues. Earlier this month, [a disruption](#) at North Star led to a series of escapes and property damage.

‘Mama, can I tell you something?’

The mother of the 14-year-old boy says she learned about her son’s abuse when a North Star staff member called her to report it last month. At the time, her son had been at the hospital in Anchorage for about three weeks.

She learned that a nurse overheard him tell another staff member that he had been abused, the boy’s father said. Within hours, he was at a clinic undergoing a forensic sexual assault examination.

“I was like, what? What? This is how this transpires?” the mother said.

The mom got on the first flight to Anchorage. When she went to pick up her son at North Star, she said, she was shocked by his appearance.

“He was so skinny,” she said. “And just covered in bruises.”

He was already a small kid, just over 5 feet tall, and had cognitive delays that caused him to function like someone younger than his age, his parents said. His caseworker had told the hospital to place him with younger boys because of the delays, his father said. Instead, he was placed with boys 13-18.

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She signed for her son’s discharge “against medical advice.” She says North Star employees warned her that usually when a parent removes their kid from North Star against medical advice, the Office of Children’s Services and even police could get involved because it could be considered medical neglect.

But in this case, that wouldn’t be necessary: The reason for discharge listed on his paperwork: “Reported sexual abuse on 9/2,” the document says. “Being discharged AMA on 9/6.” The boy had been “bullied” on the unit, the discharge paperwork said.

When the mom and her son pulled out of the hospital parking lot in their rented car, the boy spoke up.

“He said, ‘Mama, can I tell you something?’ ” his mother said. “He proceeded to tell me in detail about the (sexual assault).”

Last week, the family received mail from North Star showing that the cost of their son’s three-week hospitalization was \$62,000.

A lawsuit filed by the family of an 11-year-old boy from Interior Alaska admitted to North Star in August 2021 describes a similar scenario: When the boy entered

North Star, the hospital was warned that he was “prone to being an easy target for bullies,” and needed to be under close observation for his own safety, the complaint contends.

“North Star was also aware that some of its patients suffer serious mental illness and can be prone to violence and sexual aggression,” the complaint says. The hospital “failed to even monitor” the boy and other patients, the lawsuit says.

A few days after he got there, the boy “found himself alone and unsupervised in a room with another patient who proceeded to sexually assault” him.

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A heavily redacted police report shows that the incident involving the 11-year-old was first reported to police on Aug. 6. The Anchorage Police Department did not answer a question about whether the case is still open more than a year later.

The assault “profoundly damaged” the boy “in ways that will likely adversely affect the rest of his life,” the complaint says.

That thought weighs heavy on the mind of the 14-year-old boy’s parents, too. Since he returned to Southeast Alaska in early September, he’s already been back to the emergency room.

“He just keeps reliving everything that happened,” his dad said.

“I just have to remind him that he didn’t do anything wrong,” his mom said. “It took a lot of courage for him to stand up and say something.”

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If you or someone you know needs help, here are some resources:

- *Call 911 for immediate emergency assistance.*

- *If you or someone you know are dealing with a mental health crisis or suicidal thoughts, you can call the 24/7 Alaska Careline at 988, or 1-877-266-HELP.*
- *For more information on the Alaska Suicide Prevention Council and suicide in Alaska, visit health.alaska.gov/suicideprevention.*
- *Call STAR (Standing Together Against Rape) Alaska's 24-hour crisis line at 907-276-7273 or its toll-free crisis line at 800-478-8999.*
- *Contact the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault at 907-586-3650 or at andvsa.org/find-help/member-programs.*
- *Find a local service program by Alaska region at the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault website: dps.alaska.gov/CDVSA/Services/VictimServices.*
- *For additional information about reporting sexual assault and resources for survivors, visit on.adn.com/unheardresources.*

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Michelle Theriault Boots is a longtime reporter for the Anchorage Daily News. She focuses on stories about the intersection of public policy and Alaskans' lives. Before joining the ADN in 2012, she worked at daily newspapers on the West Coast and earned a master's degree from the University of Oregon.



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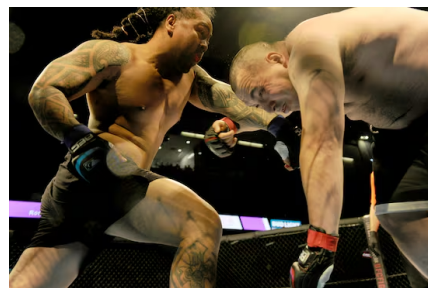
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