Panel chairman recalls interview at girls’ home

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WASHINGTON - A state government committee investigating alleged child abuse at a church-run girls home in Arcadia in 1982 interviewed one student privately, but needed a court order to help secure much-delayed access to the school.

Earlier this week, the committee chairman said the 1982 investigation of the New Bethany Baptist Church Home for Girls said the committee had never talked to any student in private.

But late last week, a member of the investigative committee, said Tuesday he had conferred with state Rep. Louis "Woody" Jenkins, D-Baton Rouge, and agreed with Jenkins' recollection that there had been one private interview.

Jenkins, a proponent of minimal state regulation over church-run schools and homes, participated in the 1982 probe of alleged beatings at the New Bethany Home.

The committee – called the Committee on Child Protection – later reported it did not find excessive abuse at the school.

The Legislature, which is considering a bill to impose state licensing on church-run schools and homes, is expected to look at the committee's operations and how well it works.

Jenkins played a key role in the creation of the committee investigation system in 1990 when he succeeded in enacting a state law aimed at curbing the regulatory powers of state government over the church facilities.

Jenkins and many fundamentalist church leaders – including the Rev. Mack Ford, founder of the New Bethany Home – oppose the current state licensing bill.

Earlier this week, a former Deputy Department of Health and Human Resources official, told the Morning Advocate the 1982 investigation of alleged beatings at the New Bethany Home had gone slowly and did not entirely satisfy him.

The formal report of the investigation, now file at DHHR, reveals that five months elapsed between the first report of the alleged beatings and the investigating committee's interview with one student alone and off campus. The committee then toured the grounds of the home and talked with some students in small, semi-private areas of the classroom.

The delays included the school's refusal to allow DHHR social workers onto the grounds. Jenkins said that absent criminal charges, only the committee itself can investigate church facilities.

The study committee membership was assembled for a couple of inspection trips, but the visits were thwarted by bad weather and the inability of their plane to land in Arcadia. Not all members of the committee, which is comprised of representatives from government, professional and religious areas, were able to make the actual investigatory trip.

Some of the professional and citizen members were on the thwarted visits, but only Carmen; the religious representative, a Shreveport minister; Jenkins; and a Jenkins aide were on the actual investigatory visit.

School officials also refused to permit the committee to privately interview a student.

The student interviewed alone had not raised the charges of beatings, which were made by two runaways to the Texas police. However, the runaways had reported they believed the third student was being mistreated at the home. When interviewed, the third student said she had been paddled but never beaten and did not know of mistreatment at the school, the committee reported.

Carson, the Shreveport minister and Jenkins interviewed the student at a church in Shreveport. She was brought there by car by the Rev. Mack Ford, founder of the school. Ford remained outside the room during the interview.

Investigators never interviewed the runaways who had told the stories of beatings. The girls were no longer at the school by the time the December 1982 investigative trip was arranged.

One of the girls had been returned to the school on her mother's orders and was there for a period of time while the investigators sought access to her, but she had left by the time they finally toured the facility. This was the student the committee previously was denied the right to interview in private.

Carson talked by telephone to mothers of both the runaways. One told him that her daughter had not been the one to actually make the allegation to Texas police, that she was doing well, and that she had not been mistreated at the home. New Bethany officials also submitted a statement from a doctor saying he had examined this girl and found no evidence of mistreatment.

The other mother said her daughter was a habitual liar whose word could not be trusted. This mother also said she had seen only scratches on her daughter, which she attributed to the girl running through the bushes as she fled the home.

Inside the home, the investigators reported seeing facilities that were "clean and adequate. They spoke of a "random" with a few students in a classroom, where each student was to be semi-enclosed cubicle. These girls expressed no unhappiness with the home.

The committee did not ask to interview other students privately, and the law may not have permitted that.

Carson said in an interview this week: "Whether you agree with Mr. Jenkins or not, he believes the inquiry should be limited to the allegation in question and should not be broadened to look into everything at a church-run facility, Carson said.

"He (Jenkins) thinks the inquiry should be at the particular allegation, from my understanding, it (the law) is fairly tight," he said.

This interpretation meant the committee would talk in private only to the student named as a possible victim of abuse.

Carson recalled the girl (who is named in the report) as "very trim, a very quiet girl." An interview indicated she got whacks, but never indicated it was excessive.

Carson said the issue of regulating church homes and schools is difficult to address.

There is some concern about a facility (such as New Bethany) that separated, that far removed from the mainstream,... having that much control over the student. The potential for abuse there is, I grant you that," he said.

But that doesn’t mean abuse will occur, Carson said. He said there are some "very positive" stories from graduates of the unregulated church homes and schools where they are bringing specific criminal charges.

A sheriff "can go in there for murder, rape, child abuse. That is not arguable," Jenkins said.

Any convicted of child abuse should not be able to go to jail, Jenkins said.

Last week, Jenkins said he "thinks highly" of Rev. Ford as a person, and "would have a hard time believing" Ford would abuse children himself, or condone it among his staff.

Jenkins emphasized this week that he is not a spokesman for Ford or his homes and is not affiliated with them; has no information about recently raised new allegations of abuse at Ford's homes; and, therefore, can neither defend nor accuse the homes in specific cases.

Ford has told the Advocate he allows only limited paddling at his homes, as a "last resort" discipline after counseling fails.

He has denied all allegations of mistreating children.