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SEX ABUSE PLAGUES SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF NATIONWIDE

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His grin as wide as North Carolina, the skinny blond boy clowns for a snapshot in the glow of 12 birthday candles. But alongside that moment, a darker image is burned into his mother's memory.

The day after the party, Pat Locklear's son fell victim to the unchecked sexual abuse that plagues state-run residential schools for deaf children across the country.

As Jeb drifted off to sleep in a dormitory at the Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf, a student with a troubled past crept in and molested him. "I thought my heart would explode," recalled Locklear, her face crumpling in pain. "I adopted him because I loved him and wanted to protect him. And the school let that shield of protection down -- and then covered it up."

The hard truth is that hundreds of parents like Locklear have entrusted their children to schools for the deaf only to suffer the same anguish.

At least half of the nation's 50 taxpayer-funded schools have been embroiled in controversies about sexual and physical abuse over the last two decades, an investigation by the Seattle Post-Intelligencer has found. In state after state, abuse remains a silent threat at the schools.

And yet the federal government has not stepped in, and many states have refused to deal with the problem - or even acknowledge it exists.

The P-I examined three deaf schools in different regions of the country. Documents obtained through court proceedings and public-disclosure requests found these examples in North Carolina, Oregon and Arkansas:

At least six sexual-assault calls to 911 were logged from the Eastern North Carolina school during the past two years, even though measures aimed at safeguarding students were supposedly in place.

Two alleged rapes, eight molestations and seven cases of sexual harassment were reported at the Oregon School for the Deaf during the past school year. But school officials downplayed the incidents and delayed reporting some to police.

Arkansas School for the Deaf Superintendent Carl Barger faces trial for hampering an investigation of a dorm director accused of soliciting sex from a student.

The problem has hit close to home, too. Earlier this year, the P-I documented 160 sex-related incidents at the

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Washington School for the Deaf in Vancouver between September 1998 and February 2001, including six alleged student rapes. In June, Gov. Gary Locke ordered major safety-related reforms to be put in place by the end of this year.

Experts have warned for years that children who attend residential schools for the deaf are at a significantly higher risk of being sexually abused. Kindergartners living far from their families are mixing with students as old as 21 on campuses where nighttime supervision is left to dorm staff paid less than fast-food workers. Experts say basic safety improvements - from better staff training and screening to meaningful oversight - are sorely needed nationwide.

"It's a sick system," said Dr. Alan Cohen, a psychiatrist who helped start the National Deaf Academy near Orlando, Fla., the country's first psychiatric facility for deaf youngsters. Almost all the boys treated by Cohen in the past year had either suffered sexual abuse at residential schools or preyed on others.

"The deaf state school system is archaic, poorly managed and poorly funded," Cohen said. "Deaf children deserve better."

The U.S. Department of Education has looked the other way, saying its job under special-education law is ensuring access to schooling for deaf children - not monitoring safety.

Yet, public universities have been required by law for a decade to report campus crime statistics to the federal department. That allows families to evaluate safety as well as academics when choosing a school.

The reasons for the lapses in oversight by federal and state governments add up to a tangled mix of politics, denial, economics and the marginalization of the deaf in a hearing world.

"If we had a school system for hearing kids like this, there would be an uproar," said Donna Mertens, an education professor at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., who wrote a 1996 study on sexual abuse at a school for the deaf.

Parents of deaf children are reluctant to make trouble for the residential schools they rely on. Those who complain find the institutions aren't accountable to elected boards, unlike other public elementary and secondary school districts.

For deaf children, 90 percent of whom grow up in hearing families, residential schools offer one of the few places they can be immersed in American Sign Language (ASL) and forge social links to the deaf world. Fluency in ASL is crucial to acceptance among the "culturally deaf," who view hearing loss not as a disability but a difference, like race.

"Residential schools are the crucible of culture for the deaf community," said Patricia Sullivan, a psychologist at Boys Town National Research Hospital in Omaha, Neb., and a leading authority on abuse and disabilities. "They don't want the schools to be closed. Rather than make them safe, they ignore the abuse."

The deaf community fears negative publicity that could threaten the future of the schools, said Marilyn Smith, executive director of the Seattle-based Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services.

"Deaf culture is so rich and valued in our life, and the residential schools support that," Smith said.

That doesn't mean abuse should be ignored, said Smith, adding that she will "fight hard to keep these schools open, and at the same time push for big-time change" aimed at protecting students.

Smith maintained, however, that deaf children are abused just as often in public schools - an assumption that is not supported by recent research.

Children with disabilities are more than twice as likely to suffer sexual abuse, and attending a residential school adds a "major risk factor," Sullivan said. Dorm staff, older students and peers are the most common perpetrators, and incidents happen most often on buses, in bathrooms and dorm rooms.

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About 10 percent of the 71,000 school-age deaf or hard-of-hearing students in the country attend residential schools, including children as young as 5 and as old as 21. That number has plummeted since 1975, when federal law required public schools to provide services to disabled children. Until then, state-run residential schools had been the only option for generations of deaf children.

Communication barriers heighten the risk of abuse for deaf children: It's simply harder for them to report assaults when most adults do not know ASL. Fluency in ASL isn't a job requirement at most deaf schools, and it's common for dorm workers and administrators to know little or no sign language.

"A deaf child is the perfect victim," said Mackay Vernon, a Florida psychologist who has worked with deaf clients for 50 years. "Most parents don't know sexual signs. And only 1 percent of teachers do. Even if kids try to tell, they may not be understood."

'I cry when I drop her off'

At the sprawling, 147-student Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf, Superintendent Thomasine Hardy knew no sign language when she was hired 11/2 years ago. She relies on an interpreter and takes classes on campus.

Safety, she said, is a top priority. "I would not in any way tolerate putting children at risk," said Hardy, who "prefers to err on the side of reporting."

But the school's problems with abuse prior to her arrival don't interest her.

"History is history," she said.

In a recent interview, Hardy insisted there have been no serious sex-related incidents on campus during her tenure.

The school, run by the state Department of Health and Human Services, refused to release records requested through public disclosure, citing privacy concerns. But police records indicated an emergency sexual-assault call from the school in March, and at least five other sexual-assault calls since Hardy arrived in February 2000.

Hardy said she wasn't aware of the calls. After looking into it, she said a month later that they involved minor student-on-student assaults, and that no criminal charges resulted.

The school's failure to report the incidents to the state ombudsman was a "procedural error," according to Health and Human Services spokeswoman Lori Walston.

But Hardy has also let one recent safety-related reform slide: The school's watchdog human rights committee hadn't met for months because of budget cuts.

Two state agencies began investigations into allegations of widespread sexual abuse at all three of North Carolina's schools for the deaf in spring 1998 - almost three years after Jeb Locklear was molested.

Psychologist Steven Hardy-Braz had worked at the Eastern deaf school in the tobacco-farming town of Wilson for two years by then and was troubled by the school's handling of a string of sexual assaults. That frustration eventually factored into his decision to leave in 1999.

In violation of state law, administrators sent abuse victims to the school nurse, he said. Police or child-protective workers weren't called.

"The school took care of these problems in-house," Hardy-Braz said.

Dorm staff sometimes dismissed rapes as "consensual sex," including a case in which a 17-year-old boy raped a

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12-year-old girl in November 1997, he said. The boy later pleaded guilty to a felony sex charge.

Sexually aggressive students, Hardy-Braz said, remained on campus and rarely got treatment - partly because there was nowhere to send them. The school didn't do criminal background checks on staff, increasing the possibility that child molesters would be hired.

A dorm counselor was fired in May 1998 after a 17-year-old multihandicapped boy said he'd been molested. Police investigated, but no charges were filed. The school rehired the counselor after he appealed his dismissal, according to news reports.

The next year, a bus driver for the school was accused of molesting a multihandicapped girl.

"I wanted to press charges but the school was worried about bad publicity," said the girl's mother. "They were worried about losing their jobs."

School officials asked her to drop the matter, but the mother persisted, and the bus driver pleaded no-contest to the offense. Bus supervision was tightened.

With no other viable options in local schools, the mother reluctantly sent her 13-year-old daughter back to the school.

"I cry when I drop her off on Sundays," she said recently.

The state ordered safety-related reforms, including in-state criminal background checks for new hires, staff training, human rights committees and sex education. Students deemed sexually aggressive were moved out of the dorms and into therapeutic foster homes.

It was "no coincidence" that the superintendents at all three schools were also replaced, said Peter Leousis, a former assistant secretary of Health and Human Services. "These were not just isolated incidents. There was an embarrassing lack of protocols for making sure the children were safe."

At the time, the superintendents reported directly to Len Aron in the department's deaf and hard-of-hearing division. Aron, who now runs the Washington School for the Deaf, would later attribute the problems to lack of funding.

But Leousis blamed politics for the reluctance of Aron and others to intervene.

"The deaf world, at least in North Carolina, is very insular," he said. "They were afraid it would become more ammunition for closing the schools down."

Arkansas cover-up alleged

The trouble began, of all places, at a school-sponsored violence-prevention workshop.

The event went into the evening on Nov. 1, 2000, and afterward a dorm supervisor from the Arkansas School for the Deaf volunteered to share a 16-year-old student's Little Rock hotel room to provide "supervision."

That night, the supervisor, Byron Caldwell, bragged to the boy about his sexual exploits and interests in marijuana and Internet porn. Then he tried to pressure the teen into having sex, "dry-humping" him on the bed, the boy's mother said.

At first, her son was too scared to talk about what had happened.

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"We knew something was wrong. He'd be in the bathroom crying," the mother said.

Two weeks later, a school counselor coaxed a few details out of him, and notified the school's superintendent, Carl Barger.

The boy also composed an eight-page letter to Barger. "I'm not letting this go away because it's terrified and infuriating (sic) me," he wrote.

Barger "dismissed the report without fully investigating it," and the school's board of trustees supported him, according to a federal lawsuit filed last spring against the school by the boy's family.

Concerned about the boy, the counselor finally called the state's abuse-reporting hot line on Nov. 24. Barger "wrote her up" for insubordination.

Child-protective workers deemed the counselor's first report too minor to look into, but a second hot line call by another alarmed staff member in January prompted an investigation by Child Protective Services and police.

Caldwell "stalked" the boy on campus in an effort to enforce his silence, according to the suit.

In early February, the frightened boy ran away to Chicago. "I couldn't take it any more," he said in a recent interview.

The boy transferred to a local high school. When that didn't work out, he returned briefly to the deaf school. But he suffered nightmares and couldn't eat. He lost 15 pounds. Other students ostracized him, and he felt uncomfortable on a campus that he said is rife with sexual innuendo - from teachers bragging about their sex lives in class to "kids hassling each other for sex."

Today, he attends a community college program and struggles with depression.

"The deaf school didn't protect me," he said.

Barger was charged six months ago with hampering the child-molestation investigation, a misdemeanor. The superintendent, who took over the 200-student school 13 months ago, has pleaded innocent and is awaiting trial.

The dorm supervisor, Caldwell, pleaded innocent to a sex-related felony and was suspended with pay pending trial.

Although Barger is still running the school, he refused to be interviewed or allow a reporter on campus. Other officials were instructed not to comment. The state refused to release documents relating to any other incidents of abuse requested through public disclosure.

The school's governor-appointed board of trustees chairman, Mark Riabie, backed Barger and Caldwell, saying he was confident they would be cleared of wrongdoing.

"It's unfortunately this child who will be embarrassed," Riabie predicted. And last spring, the board voted to extend Barger's contract.

Deaf community leaders often duck such controversies, but John Schroedel, a University of Arkansas professor who is deaf, responded with a June 8 letter to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

"Treating this possible case of abuse as if nothing happened is totally wrong," he wrote.

Women share horror stories

For more than a century, schools for the deaf have been a second home for children - a place to belong.

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The schools are woven into the very fabric of deaf history and identity. But so are the strands of abuse.

Tales of staff abuse date back decades among former students of the 131-year-old Oregon School for the Deaf in northeast Salem.

One woman recently recalled how a night dorm counselor - "Mr. Jones" - used to pay her a nickel every time he molested her as a 7-year-old. The man has since died.

Until she began counseling 15 years ago, she didn't realize how badly the abuse had affected her.

"I want to kill him," said the woman, 43, who spoke on condition of anonymity. She named five other male staff members who molested and raped students - boys and girls - in the '60s and '70s.

"It is very sad," she said. "I have heard too many stories like this."

The worst culprit, two former students say, was a top administrator with access to confidential information about their lives. At first, he would earn their trust, lending support when family problems flared. What he really wanted, the girls discovered, was sex.

Two women recently came forward to publicly accuse Don Lorenzen, the school's former director and dean of students, of sexually assaulting them when they were teenage students in the late '70s and early '80s.

Lorenzen, who left the school in 1999, has denied the allegations. But his accusers say they've talked to others who say they, too, were sexually abused by the administrator.

When Director Jane Mulholland took over two years ago, she put up anti-harassment posters all over the 55-acre campus. About 130 students attend, half living in residence in a collection of aging, cavernous dorms.

"I want this to be a safe place for kids," said Mulholland, who is fluent in ASL and taught at the school for most of the past decade. "You have to go into it knowing you must have a high level of supervision and training."

Mulholland has made efforts to prevent abuse - from reporting incidents directly to the Oregon State Police to refusing admission to sexually aggressive students or housing them off campus.

The director also insisted her staff know how to sort out abuse from consensual sex.

"I don't believe kids are capable of consent (to sex) in middle school and often even in high school," she said.

And still there have been incidents of concern, school records revealed.

On April 10, a high school girl had sex with three boys in a locker room. Although the girl reported she "felt dirty" and one boy was suicidal because he "felt so bad for her," staff debated whether it was consensual. For two days, they didn't call police or take her to the hospital for an exam. No charges resulted.

In another case, a boy pressured a girl into showing him her breasts on a school bus on Feb. 19, then digitally penetrated her. The incident wasn't reported to police for three days.

It wasn't considered to be a rape, said Mulholland, who couldn't explain the reporting delays.

During the same year, two middle school boys were caught having oral sex in a dorm bed on Nov. 5. Even though one boy already had a full-time adult monitor because of aggressive behavior, police did not investigate because the incident was deemed consensual.

When the same boy fondled the other boy in a laundry room three months later, both families were upset, and the

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aggressor was moved off campus. Police weren't called.

Trail of shattered lives

Controversy about abuse is anathema to schools for the deaf. Bad publicity can deplete enrollment and push up costs that top \$50,000 or more annually per student.

Enrollments are already on the decline nationwide because more students attend close to home. That has forced the closure of several schools, most recently the Central North Carolina School for the Deaf in June.

Despite higher costs, deaf school students graduate with little more than a fourth-grade reading level, a record no better than that of public schools, experts say. Yet, even the most vocal critics of residential schools believe they are a crucial resource for the many students who will never thrive in the mainstream.

But only if they are safe.

And since protecting students "isn't rocket science," experts say the biggest barrier is denial.

That denial is fueled by everything from blaming the victim to believing that "the deaf don't rat on other deaf," Mertens, the Gallaudet professor, found.

Combine such institutional taboos with the geographical and cultural isolation of deaf schools, and abuse can fester. Even when administrators try to crack down on predatory staff, they often downplay rapes between students.

"It's very dangerous to have kids preying on kids," warned Vernon, the psychologist. "It's like anthrax. It spreads."

And in its wake, a trail of shattered lives.

"Who will speak for the children?" asked Jeb's mother, Pat Locklear. "How can those who have covered this up lay down at night? Where are their hearts?" P-I reporter Ruth Teichroeb can be reached at 206-448-8175 or ruthteichroeb@seattlepi.com THE SERIES TODAY: Problems of sexual or physical abuse abound at many of the nation's 50 state-run residential schools. TOMORROW: Washington's school for the deaf makes strides toward making the campus safe, but one group says it's time for a public apology. Credits RUTH TEICHROEB Teichroeb covers social issues at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, where she has worked since 1997. She has been a reporter for 15 years, specializing in investigative stories about children. RENEE C. BYER Byer, a newspaper photographer for more than 20 years, has worked for the P-I since February 2000. She teamed with Teichroeb on a prior series investigating abuse at the Washington School for the Deaf. PROJECT EDITOR: William Miller PHOTO EDITOR: Don Marquis COPY EDITOR: David Tishendorf PAGE DESIGNER: Jake Ellison ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR/PROJECTS: Neal Pattison/ WHERE TO GO FOR HELP WASHINGTON:

To report child abuse: 1-866-END-HARM

King County Sexual Assault Center 24-hour crisis line (relay calls accepted): 800-825-7273

Spokane Sexual Assault Center: 509-624-7273

Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services, 24-hour TTY crisis line: 206-236-3134; ADWAS@adwas.org

Seattle Mental Health Institute Deaf Services: 206-324-9317; e-mail: anneb@smh.org WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

NATIONAL:

American Society of Deaf Children: www.deafchildren.org

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Center for Abused Children with Disabilities, Boys Town National Research Hospital: www.boystownhospital.org/research/areas/abused.asp

National Deaf Academy: www.nationaldeafacademy.com
PAINFUL LEGACY Across America, schools for the deaf have been embroiled in controversy stemming from the physical and sexual abuse of students. This P-I report focuses on three states, Oregon, North Carolina and Arkansas. But experts say nearly half of the nation's state-run schools have experienced similar problems. Some of the major incidents in the past 15 years.
AUGUST 1986: Attorney general recommends \$2.5 million payment to settle suits filed by former students of Texas School for the Deaf, who were sexually abused by staff. Superintendent and security director plead no contest to failing to report abuse.
DECEMBER 1988: Mississippi School for the Deaf superintendent fired for failing to protect students from widespread sexual and physical abuse. Seven current and former employees investigated.
FEBRUARY 1992: Iowa pays \$550,000 to settle suit brought by former deaf school student, alleging sexual and physical abuse. State paid nearly \$2 million in 1988 to nine former students making similar claims.
APRIL 1993: Two former staff members at South Carolina School for the Deaf pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting students.
FEBRUARY 1994: State begins investigation at Kentucky School for the Deaf after three staffers and 19-year-old student are accused of sexual abuse. Task force recommends changes, including upgrading employees' sign-language skills.
JULY 1996: Former dorm supervisor at Maine's deaf school sentenced to 18 days in jail for molesting three teenage students.
SEPTEMBER 1996: Former priest gets 10-year prison term for molesting six deaf boys at Maryland School for the Deaf and Catholic Deaf Center. Police investigated after one victim's therapist reports abuse dating back to '70s.
JUNE 1998: Two state agencies begin investigations into sexual abuse at North Carolina's three schools for the deaf; later order safety reforms.
FEBRUARY 2000: State task force investigating sexual abuse at Louisiana School for the Deaf criticizes superintendent, recommends more staff training.
AUGUST 2000: Former teacher at Central North Carolina School for the Deaf receives 45-day suspended jail term for molesting 15-year-old girl.
APRIL 2001: Maine governor promises compensation to former students of Baxter School for the Deaf, who endured sexual and physical abuse in the '60s and '70s.
MAY 2001: Arkansas School for the Deaf superintendent charged with hindering investigation of dorm supervisor accused of asking student for sex. Superintendent and supervisor plead innocent and are awaiting trial.
JUNE 2001: Gov. Gary Locke orders sweeping safety reforms at Washington School for the Deaf after former students and staff claim they are victims of a longstanding pattern of sexual and physical abuse.
AUGUST 2001: State pays \$125,000 to settle lawsuit by former student who says she was raped at Washington School for the Deaf. Five other suits alleging sexual abuse are pending.
NOVEMBER 2001: Two former students of Oregon School for the Deaf publicly accuse former top administrator of sexually abusing them.

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EXAMINING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF

GRAPHIC: Color Photos

PHOTOS BY RENEE C. BYER: (1) ABOVE: Jeb Locklear, 18, chats with his aunt, Jennifer Carter, a sign-language interpreter, at his home in Red Springs, N.C. The youth and his family still struggle with anger at the state-run Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf for failing to protect Jeb from being sexually abused. (2) Jeb and his mom, Pat Locklear, talk about his day as he gets home from school. Pat took Jeb into her home as a preschooler, eventually adopting the boy, who was born deaf and who also has mild cerebral palsy and a developmental disability. (3) Coach Wayne Lloyd swings Jeb into the air during gym class at Red Springs High School. Jeb had just tried to sneak up on the coach while pretending to be "The Rock," a wrestling star. Even Jeb's elbow pads are marked "The Rock." Jeb is supervised all day at school by Rorie. Jeb has been suspended twice for angry outbursts that have plagued him since he was sexually abused by a student at a state-run school for the deaf. (4) Jeb Locklear, a high school senior, mimics his hero, "The Rock." Jeb carries books about the sports entertainment wrestler around in his backpack and

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dreams about moving to Florida after graduation to be a pro wrestler. Jeb is the only deaf student at his hometown Red Springs High School.(5) Carolyn Griffin, an American Sign Language interpreter, struggles to explain Shakespearean sonnets to Jeb in his class at Red Springs High School. Griffin, who has worked with Jeb for four years, accompanies him throughout the school day. Besides this English class, Jeb's only subjects are gym and driver's education. The school ranks among the lowest academically in North Carolina, and an education team is on site assessing its weaknesses. Jeb has attended public schools since his mother was forced to remove him from the state-run school for the deaf, where he was abused.(6) Benji Rorie, 23, a high-risk intervention worker, right, spends eight hours a day with Jeb, left, a high school senior who sometimes jokes too much with other students and can have emotional outbursts. Rorie also acts as a kind of bodyguard for Jeb at the school, which is known for its discipline problems. Every morning, Jeb pulls a large, trendy silver Superman necklace from his locker and puts it on. At the end of each day, he stashes the necklace in his locker to hide it from his mother. "He just wants to fit in," says Rorie.(7) Jeb, far left, practices the song "Healing Hands" with a deaf ministry program run by his mother, Pat Locklear, in Red Springs. Jeb's involvement in this ministry is his only contact with other deaf students. Deeply religious, Pat Locklear says her faith is what has helped her cope with the pain of being unable to protect her son from being molested by another student six years ago.(8) Jeb spends an hour and a half most days sweeping the hallways of Red Springs High School and doing cleaning chores. He wanted to take a vocational training class, but it was full. Instead, this is all the school can offer Jeb, who is paid \$40 a month. He also gets a class credit because his sweeping is considered to be a "leadership development" program for students with disabilities.

TYPE: SERIES

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