

RESULTS



BROKEN SHIELD

DECEMBER 3, 2012

Calls grow for local police to take cases at developmental centers

*By Ryan Gabrielson
California Watch*

<http://bit.ly/BrokenShield-Local-police-takeover-push>

Sonoma County's top prosecutor has joined with advocates for the developmentally disabled in calling for local police to take charge of criminal investigations of patient abuse at California's board-and-care institutions.

Cases involving reported assault and negligence have long been left to the Office of Protective Services, the police force at the five state-run developmental centers. The force's detectives and patrol officers have routinely failed to do basic police work even when patients die under suspicious circumstances.

The force has performed especially poorly in sexual abuse cases, **California Watch reported** in a story published Thursday.

Patients have accused caretakers of molestation and rape 36 times since 2009, but the Office of Protective Services did not order a single hospital-supervised rape examination for any of the alleged victims. "Rape kit" exams are routinely used to collect evidence at most police departments.

Eleven of the sex abuse cases were reported at the Sonoma Developmental Center, all from female patients living in the Corcoran Unit.

"The local law enforcement agencies have better tools than (the Office of Protective Services) does to handle those kinds of investigations," Jill Ravitch, Sonoma County district attorney, said in an interview Friday. She has recommended that the county sheriff's office take over responsibility for potential abuse cases, including sex assaults.

The centers house roughly 1,600 patients with cerebral palsy, severe autism and intellectual disabilities in Sonoma, Los Angeles, Riverside, Tulare and Orange counties. The state spends more than \$300,000 a year to care for each patient.

The Arc and United Cerebral Palsy in California, an advocacy group for the developmentally dis-



MIKE KEPKA/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

The Sonoma Developmental Center in Eldridge is one of five state-run institutions for the developmentally disabled.

abled, has argued for months that city and county police agencies should investigate patient abuse allegations at the institutions. Greg deGiere, public policy director for the group, said the Office of Protective Services mishandled sex assault investigations, making outside police involvement urgent.

“This problem is out of control and warrants a much stronger response,” deGiere said.

State officials have documented hundreds of **cases of abuse** and unexplained injuries, almost none of which have led to

arrests, California Watch has reported in **a series of stories** this year. The Office of Protective Services has failed to **collect physical evidence** in numerous potential violent crime cases.

And in the three dozen cases of sexual abuse, internal records reveal that patients suffered molestation, forced oral sex and vaginal lacerations. But for years, the state-run police force has moved so slowly and ineffectively that predators have stayed a step ahead of law enforcement or abused new victims, records show.

In response to reporting by California Watch, state lawmakers in August ordered the California State Auditor to examine the force’s handling of criminal investigations and overtime spending. Gov. Jerry Brown signed two laws that require the centers to notify outside law enforcement and Disability Rights California, a protection organization, of alleged patient abuse and certain serious injuries.

The state Department of Developmental Services operates the centers and the police force. Terri Delgadillo, the agency’s director, said Friday in a written statement that the measures improve patients’ safety.

“The department welcomed the passage and signing of **SB 1051** and **SB 1522**, that will further ensure developmental center investigators and outside law enforcement agencies work more collaboratively to investigate unexplained injuries or allegations of abuse,” Delgadillo wrote.

It is unclear how prepared, or willing, local city police and sheriff’s departments are to shoulder the additional caseload from the centers. Local law enforcement agencies across the state have long deferred allegations of abuse at the centers to the Office of Protective Services.

Sonoma County Sheriff Steve Freitas could not be reached for comment on Friday.

Going forward, deGiere said the onus should be on outside police agencies to head up investigations of crimes against developmental center patients.

“If they don’t get involved, it’s because they choose not to get involved,” he said, “not because they can’t.”