

CONNECTICUT

Reports of sexual and physical abuse at the American School for the Deaf prompt scrutiny from disability rights watchdog



By DAVID OWENS
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American School for the Deaf in West Hartford. (Dennis Hohenberger / Special to Courant Community)

The American School for the Deaf in West Hartford on Friday joined Hotchkiss, Choate Rosemary Hall, Loomis Chaffee and other private schools across

Connecticut and the nation that have been forced to confront episodes of sexual and physical abuse of students by faculty and staff.

While many of the underlying allegations are similar — sexual contact between staff and students — the victims at the American School for the Deaf have disabilities, prompting scrutiny from a disability rights watchdog group in Connecticut.

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“People with disabilities can be in more vulnerable situations, and sometimes the people who are supposed to be caring for them take advantage of that vulnerability,” said Gretchen Knauff, the executive director of Hartford-based Disability Rights Connecticut.

[An investigation reveals allegations that deaf children were sexually and physically abused for decades at the American School for the Deaf »](#)

“In this situation, you’re also talking about children,” Knauff said. “When you have adults taking care of children ... there is the vulnerability of the imbalance of power.”

Disability Rights Connecticut is a federally mandated protection and advocacy agency for Connecticut that is required to investigate reports of abuse and neglect of

people with disabilities. It has the authority to ensure effective abuse and neglect investigations.

Knauff said the investigative unit at Disability Rights Connecticut will examine the school's report "to see what we think about it as a whole." She said there is a concern that the report was produced by the school.

The 203-year-old school on Friday released an investigative report that documents dozens of instances of sexual and physical abuse of students from the 1950s through the 1980s, including allegations against a man who led the school for decades.

A year ago, American School for the Deaf officials said they learned of allegations of inappropriate physical conduct by former faculty and staff at the school and the summer camp it runs in Salisbury, Camp Isola Bella. School officials said they immediately contacted West Hartford police, the state Department of Education and the state Department of Children and Families. The school also hired Edward Heath, a lawyer with Robinson + Cole in Hartford, to conduct an investigation.

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In the report, released late Friday afternoon, Heath found that more than 80 former students, former faculty or staff and witnesses corroborated accounts of sexual assault of minors and physical abuse, including humiliating corporal punishment.

Eight men and one woman were named in the report and had roles in the school's dormitories. Several of the accused are dead, but only one of the living former employees who was accused spoke with investigators, and he denied the allegations, according to the report.

The allegations also include one credible claim made against Edmund Boatner, the school's longtime executive director from 1935 to 1970. He died in 1983



In January 1959, a bronze bust of longtime American School for the Deaf executive director Dr. Edmund Boatner was presented to the school's board of directors. In this photo are Boatner and his daughter. A report released on Feb. 21, 2020, by the school on sexual and physical abuse found a credible allegation of sexual abuse against Boatner. (Courant file photo)

One former student claimed Boatner groomed her and eventually sexually abused her from the late 1950s to the early 1960s while she attended the school. The abuse ended after her graduation, but three college acquaintances of the woman remembered she told them about it, and two even recalled she was upset when Boatner visited her at the college, the report said.

“While Dr. Boatner is unable to respond to the allegations, and we recognize his otherwise unprecedented contributions to ASD and the deaf community, we found

our alum to be highly credible and corroborated by the constancy of accusation witnesses,” the report concluded.

[DOCUMENT: Read the full investigation findings »](#)

The investigation findings also detail a litany of other sexual abuses, many of which occurred against children younger than 12, the report found.

West Hartford Mayor Shari Cantor said in a statement Saturday that the reports of abuse are “heartbreaking, shocking, startling and incredibly disturbing.”

“Our community is so saddened to learn about this, and our hearts go out to the victims and their families,” she said. “ASD has engaged in this thorough investigation to understand the extent of the abuse and to hear from any and all alumni that were either victimized or knew of abuse.”

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A review of state and federal civil court dockets revealed no lawsuits against the American School for the Deaf alleging sexual abuse.

Two lawyers who handle such cases said Saturday they are not aware of any claims against the school that are in the works.

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New Haven attorney Thomas McNamara, who has filed and settled dozens of priest sexual abuse lawsuits against the Catholic Church, said he recalled hearing of a case many years ago against the school, but said it was beyond the statute of limitations. It is possible claims against the school by victims who spoke to Heath would be beyond the statute of limitations, too, he said.

“Not only are they disadvantaged in life because of their hearing issue, they’re taken advantage of because of that,” he said. “And now no one [at the legislature] is hearing them.” McNamara was referring to the judiciary committee’s decision Friday to shelve a bill that would have expanded the ability of survivors of sexual abuse to sue their abusers at any time in their lives.

Connecticut used to be a leader in allowing victims to sue, he said. “The legislature showed its wisdom in understanding how victims process this stuff,” he said. “It seems they’ve just kicked the wisdom to the gutter to protect the institutions.”

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Investigations and reports, like the one released Friday by the American School for the Deaf, are increasingly common as schools and other institutions confront past abuse allegations. In addition to reports released by a number of private schools, the Archdiocese of Hartford and the Diocese of Bridgeport have released reports detailing abuse.



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The American School for the Deaf said in its report that it has taken a number of steps to ensure such abuse does not happen again, including careful evaluation and background checks of all employees, increased training for employees, an

anonymous reporting system for any allegation of abuse and the installation of more than 200 cameras throughout the campus, including in dormitories.

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“We hold the health and safety of our students as our highest priority,” Jeff Bravin, the school’s executive director, said in a statement, though he did not respond to a request for an interview.

“Throughout the investigation, ASD has remained committed to learning the truth while ensuring that the inappropriate behavior reported from the past is never repeated,” his statement said. “On behalf of ASD and its Board of Directors, we apologize to the survivors of this abuse — this should not have happened to you — and we promise to continue to devote ourselves to protecting the current and future generations of children who rely on us and this community to enrich their lives.”

Courant staff writer Eliza Fawcett contributed to this story.

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[West Hartford American School for the Deaf sexual abuse physical abuse investigation credible allegations](#)