

Kids sexually assaulted at psychiatric hospitals, reports say

At least 18 cases of reported rape or sex abuse identified at some of the Chicago area's most prominent centers

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Two years after state authorities vowed to safeguard youths in psychiatric hospitals from sexual assault, the Tribune identified at least 18 cases of reported rape or sexual abuse at some of the Chicago area's most prominent facilities.

Hospitals sometimes failed to properly supervise patients known to be dangerous or didn't notify police and state regulators of the attacks, government records show.

"These hospitals' apparent indifference to our children's safety is reprehensible and completely unacceptable," said Kendall Marlowe, spokesman for the Department of Children and Family Services, after learning of the Tribune's findings. "We accept responsibility for the children in our care and will not tolerate those who place profit over a vulnerable child's safety."

The alleged victims — all under age 18 and some as young as 7 years old — were among society's most defenseless citizens: youths with serious mental illness who were admitted in crisis to the taxpayer-financed institutions. In the 18 cases since July 2008, all but four of the alleged victims were wards of the state with traumatic histories of abuse and neglect, government records show.

DCFS, tasked with protecting children from abuse, frequently conducted only cursory investigations, the Tribune found. The Illinois Department of Public Health, which licenses and inspects medical facilities, was able to file reports and cite patient-safety deficiencies in only three of the cases. Both agencies said they are hamstrung by weak laws and inadequate resources.

In the end, no penalties were levied against the half-dozen psychiatric hospitals where the alleged sexual assaults took place, and not one of the alleged perpetrators was arrested or prosecuted, the government records and interviews show.

At Chicago Lakeshore Hospital on the North Side last year, three male patients allegedly sneaked into the room of a 15-year-old girl at night. She told police that she tried to push away one of the boys, but he grabbed her by her hair and raped her. When hospital staff finally entered the room, the boys refused to leave and fought staff, with one of them kicking a 60-year-old nurse, according to a court memo.

But a hospital employee told police that "taking into consideration victim's current mental state ... this is not (a) bona fide incident."

The Tribune identified three other reports alleging that youths had been sexually assaulted or abused at Lakeshore since July 2008.

In one case, state health inspectors cited Lakeshore after an 11-year-old boy alleged that two male patients sodomized him in a bathroom that should have been locked and supervised by hospital staff. Inspectors said the hospital failed to document that staff had made required 15-minute checks on the two alleged assailants, one of whom had been admitted with "special observations orders for assault precautions."

None of the hospitals would discuss specific cases with the Tribune because of medical privacy laws, but a statement from Lakeshore said it has responded to assault reports by making improvements in "patient safety and positive clinical outcomes." Lakeshore added that its patients "often behave in unpredictable ways" but said the hospital "believes it does a better job" of promptly reporting assault allegations to DCFS and other authorities "than any other facility in Illinois."

Experts say sexual assaults of youths in psychiatric hospitals are generally underreported — but the devastating events often reveal systemic shortfalls in staff levels or in monitoring and treatment practices.

[On Trib Nation, reporter David Jackson describes the origins of this story.](#)