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Times-Picayune

Youth Study Center hit with suit Group claims youth denied legal counsel

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By Katy Reckdahl, Staff writer

The Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana filed an emergency motion Friday in federal court, asking that the city restore access to counsel to all juveniles held at the city-run Youth Study Center.

According to the filing, the city began barring youth advocates from the Youth Study Center shortly after JJPL filed suit in December. In that suit, the group alleged that juveniles there were locked in cells for 22 or 23 hours a day in "grossly unsanitary conditions," with inadequate education and little care given to their physical and mental health.

The complaint said that Joe DiRosa, the deputy city attorney, began denying access to JJPL attorneys but later modified that order, allowing the organization's attorneys access to the suit's named plaintiffs.

Mayoral spokesman James Ross denied that lawyers are being shut out of Youth Study Center. "The city of New Orleans has not denied access to attorneys who have identified clients that have court cases in the juvenile court system, including federal cases," he said.

Until the filing of the lawsuit, JJPL advocates -- most often, paralegals -- could visit detained juveniles at Youth Study Center during certain hours, but they were not denied access if they arranged for the visit in advance, said JJPL legal director Carol Kolinchak. Now, the advocates are turned away at the door, the plaintiffs say.

"Clearly, this was done in direct response to the filing of the lawsuit. How else can you explain it?" said Kolinchak, who said she was denied access on Jan. 9.

One of the key issues in the filing is prisoners' right to counsel, a well-established constitutional right. Because the suit is a class action, everyone detained at the Youth Study Center from the time JJPL filed the lawsuit forward is a potential plaintiff and thus a potential client of JJPL.

"They're all in the same situation; their rights are being violated in the same way," Kolinchak said. "The only way they can challenge these inhumane conditions is through a lawyer, but these lawyers are being denied access."

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