

# Nathaniel Abraham's Michigan rehabilitation center under investigation for abuse

By Larry Roberts  
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When Oakland County Judge Eugene Moore sentenced 13-year-old Nathaniel Abraham to a juvenile detention center this past January, he was widely hailed for making a positive step towards the child's rehabilitation. It was better, said voices in the media and supporters of the juvenile justice system, than sentencing Abraham as an adult, as prosecutors had urged.

At Abraham's sentencing following his trial in Pontiac, Michigan, Moore stated the "juvenile justice system is a far better alternative than the adult correctional system," and sentenced him to the W. J. Maxey Training center until the age of 21. Desiree Cooper, a liberal columnist for the *Detroit Free Press*, stated that Moore had sent the young boy to the place that was perfectly suited to fit his needs. "A safe place to play sports and socialize with friends," stated Cooper. "Small class sizes with individualized instruction. Caring adults who are available around the clock. Three square meals a day and a safe, clean place to sleep."

"That's what all children need to thrive," continued Cooper. "And, with the pound of his gavel on Thursday, that's what Oakland County Judge Eugene Moore set out to make available for Nathaniel Abraham."

The fact that this trial represented a new moral low for Michigan politics and a dangerous precedent in the increasing the criminalization of the poor and the young is true. That the refusal of Judge Moore to acquiesce to the demands of the prosecutors constituted a set-back to the right wing is also true. That sending 14-year-old Nathaniel Abraham to the W. J. Maxey Training School (something of a euphemism) is a step forward is a long, long way from the truth. In fact, such a contention is itself a barometer of how far society has now traveled from the concepts of rehabilitation, sympathy and support, how far from the conception that poverty is a social problem and responsible for much of the desperation and dehumanization which mark contemporary society.

Since the Abraham trial has garnered so much national attention, due to its defendant being the youngest child in Michigan and possibly the nation to be tried for first-degree murder as an adult, the state-rendered "solution" to the case deserves closer examination. What will the Maxey Training School do to assist this boy, the product of an admittedly tragic situation?

Recently published state documents reveal that this center is, without exaggeration, an actual danger to the youth held there. Included in the documents are exposures of sexual abuse, fighting between students in the school, fighting between inmates and staff and examples of staff members indifferent to the youth sent to the facility.

Maxey is the largest and one of the oldest juvenile detention facilities in the state, with five centers on a 320-acre campus. And while it has a capacity for 468 inmates, in September 1998 the center held 540 youth aged 12 to 20.

In 1993 social worker Barbara Synnestvedt was raped and killed by an inmate at the maximum security Green Oaks Center of the Maxey complex. Evelyn Butler, attorney for the Synnestvedt family, became alarmed when she heard that Nathaniel Abraham had been sentenced to Maxey and would be housed in the Green Oaks Center.

Butler called a news conference following Abraham's sentencing and released internal reports from the Family Independence Agency (FIA), the state government bureau in charge of all public juvenile detention centers, revealing that many of the problems that led to Synnestvedt's murder in 1993 continue at the center to this day.

One document described "rifts between staff members" who pitted some youths in the center against others. Another report said the staff "regularly swear at and use demeaning language to the youth." A report written in 1998 found that one staff member was "grooming youth

to sell drugs for him in the community when they were released.”

In 1998 Butler won a \$2 million lawsuit against the state for the rape and murder of Synnestvedt. The center houses some of the most difficult and violent youth in the complex. Five months before her murder, Synnestvedt stopped the showing of *Basic Instinct*, an R-rated film that shows sex and murder, while it was being shown to students by a teacher at the center. She felt that the movie was inappropriate for the youth, who included both convicted rapists as well as victims of sexual abuse. Butler said two weeks before she was murdered, Barbara had a meeting with the authorities at the center and complained about the hostile environment that had been created by the actions of the staff and management.

Also at the press conference were Barbara Synnestvedt's husband, Kurt, and Randall and Eyvonne Holbird, whose son James, now 17, was at Maxey from December 1997 to March 1999.

The Holbird's said James, who had a drug and alcohol addiction, was a shoplifter and parole violator before he was sent to the Maxey center. Since his release they decided to enroll him in an outside counseling program. “I don't think rehabilitation is on the curriculum there,” said Randall Holbird. “It's a warehouse for youth.”

Butler's concerns have been confirmed by new internal reports recently published by the *Detroit News*. The documents reveal:

- \* Eight staff members are under internal investigation for abusing youth at the school. Michigan State Police have charged one Maxey counselor and are pursuing charges against another.

- \* Several youth and staff members were injured in a fight described by one staff member as a “mini-riot” on March 2 involving students from two housing units. The incident report filed by the FIA referred to students and staffers fighting in the halls with teachers hiding in classrooms. One news report stated several youth inmates suffered broken bones as a result of the melee.

- \* Several investigations are under way involving sexual assaults by residents and staff members. The State Police investigation confirmed sexual activity occurring between male students at the facility and inappropriate monitoring of male inmates in showers by female employees.

Since the earlier reports were written the crisis at the center has not gone away. On March 21 the former deputy chief of security and brother of the chief of security, Dwayne Blackburn, was sentenced to 30 days in jail for assaulting a cleaning woman in a bathroom.

The Maxey center is not an aberration. The *New York Times* ran a major exposé of a juvenile prison in Jena, Louisiana exposing the abuse of its young inmates (“Privately Run Juvenile Prison in Louisiana Is Attacked for Abuse of 6 Inmates,” March 16, 2000). The penitentiary was run by a private company, the Wackenhut Corrections Corporation, the largest for-profit prison operator in the world. Guards were found to have beaten the youth regularly, youth were kept in solidarity confinement for months for no reason, and many were deprived of shoes, blankets, education and medical care in order to cut costs.

The claim by the Oakland County Prosecutor's office that they decided to prosecute Nathaniel Abraham for first-degree murder as an adult because that was the only way he could get the mental health treatment he needed was entirely cynical and self-serving. The conditions at Maxey and countless other public (and private) jails for youth only ensure more violence and anti-social behavior. The only social policy that would help Abraham and millions of other young people would be one that addresses poverty and inequality. Instead of spending billions on schools, job training and mental health, the state has decided to spend the money on the construction of prisons.

This outlook has permeated not only the most extreme right-wing elements, but those who in the past called themselves “friends” of the working class. In place of the demand for job training, money for sports and playground equipment, educational assistance and adequate funding for counseling, they are prepared to leave young people at the mercy of an overcrowded and abusive juvenile justice system.

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