

Nearly 200 people sue WA, alleging sex abuse in juvenile detention

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Fletcher, 60, of Lakewood, is one of the plaintiffs suing the state of Washington for alleged sexual abuse while in juvenile detention. Fletcher asked to only be identified by his first name. He was incarcerated for part of the early 1970s, when he was as young as 8. (Kevin Clark / The Seattle Times)

By [Lauren Girgis](#)

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LAKEWOOD, Pierce County — Dread fills the 60-year-old truck driver's body whenever he has to drive past the Emerald Queen Casino off Interstate 5.

That's where the Cascadia Juvenile Reception and Diagnostic Center stood before the Puyallup Tribe took over the land in the 1970s — and it's where Fletcher remembers, every time he drives by, the sexual abuse he says he endured at 8 years old.

Fletcher is one of 188 plaintiffs who filed a lawsuit Thursday against Washington alleging that the state failed to protect children who were sexually abused while they were in juvenile detention centers.

The state has previously faced allegations that it failed to protect children from sexual abuse in such facilities and in foster care. However, such a large number of people alleging abuse and together suing the state is rare. Attorney Vanessa Firnhaber Oslund said formerly incarcerated people are often underserved by lawyers. But when her team set out to connect with people who had stories of abuse in juvenile detention, they were “inundated” with people wanting to talk, she said.

The alleged acts occurred from the 1960s to the 2020s at 18 detention centers and group homes across the state. Children as young as Fletcher was at 8 years old up to the age of 17 were allegedly abused. Fletcher asked to be identified only by his first name to protect his privacy.

“The sexual abuse was neither the result of a momentary lapse in supervision nor a matter of a few ‘bad apples’ among detention staff,” states the lawsuit filed Thursday in King County Superior Court.

The lawsuit says what happened was instead an “institutional failure”: that the state’s disregard for the children’s well-being was “willful, and at times even nefarious.”

The state has faced several sexual abuse allegations against juvenile rehabilitation staff in recent years. In 2021, Washington paid a total of over \$2 million to 10 plaintiffs who had sued the state alleging sexual abuse while in the Green Hill School in Chehalis. Earlier that year, the state paid \$805,000 to settle sexual abuse lawsuits brought by four former detainees at the now-closed Naselle Youth Camp who alleged they were assaulted by a counselor. The counselor was arrested and charged with multiple sex crimes, but the charges were later dropped. In some such cases, the settlement funds are the survivors’ sole legal recourse.

“This is the tip of the iceberg,” said attorney Firnhaber Oslund, who is representing the plaintiffs.

A culture of abuse

The 188 individuals recalled times when they were abused by staff members who worked as guards, counselors, doctors, Bible study coordinators, nurses or janitors. More than 20 different job titles were listed in the allegations, and the plaintiffs described more than 100 different state employees, according to the lawsuit. The alleged abuses took place at Green Hill School, Echo Glen Children’s Center, Maple Lane School, Naselle Youth Camp and 15 other detention centers or group homes.

The state Department of Children, Youth and Families, which oversees juvenile rehabilitation, did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday.

Fletcher, who lives in Lakewood, says it's hard to remember most of the time he spent in juvenile detention from 1973 to 1975. He has blocked out much of it — including how long he spent there. Up until his participation in the lawsuit, he thought he had been incarcerated for just a few months.

Neglected by his parents at home in Vancouver, Wash., Fletcher was incarcerated after he set fire to his school and ended up at Cascadia in 1973. On his intake form, his charges are listed as “arson/incorrigible.” Cascadia was a first stop for kids who were to then be transferred elsewhere. Fletcher's abuse started there, according to the lawsuit, and continued once he was placed at Echo Glen. In an interview, he said one of the things he remembers best from Cascadia is the “white, hospital-industrial type tiles” he stared at while he was abused by a staff member.

At just 8 years old, he knew nothing about how to report the abuse, he said. Once he got older, he knew he didn't remember details well enough to identify any of his abusers by name. But 51 years after Fletcher was first incarcerated, he saw a post online about lawyers representing victims of sexual abuse in juvenile detention. He started learning how the state has handled allegations, and he got angry, he said.

“Anybody that had anything to do with this needs to be gone, even if they just kept silent about it and they knew about it,” Fletcher said. “We should have been protected, but we weren't.”

Many plaintiffs recalled in the lawsuit that their abusers offered them special treatment after assaulting them or threatened to punish them if they disclosed the abuse to anyone. Several described having multiple staff members participate in or watch their abuse.

“As a result of chronic mismanagement, overcrowding, inadequate supervision, and negligent hiring practices, children and teenagers incarcerated by the State of Washington have been subject to a culture of fear, violence, and sexual abuse for decades,” the lawsuit states.

Firnhaber Oslund said her firm has been contacted by more than 1,000 people in Washington regarding sexual abuse in juvenile rehabilitation. “Every corner” of the facilities has sexual predators, she said.

“This is commonplace. This is just accepted. This seems to be a perk of the job for these people,” said Firnhaber Oslund. “This isn't a bad person, and then the state finds out about it, and they get rid of them. This is a culture.”

Memories of trauma

With some of the allegations going back around a half-century, many of the plaintiffs can describe their alleged abusers only in vague terms: by their job class or memories of indistinct physical descriptions. For some of the men and women, enough time has passed that they have difficulty recalling details. Others have blocked out painful memories.

Some of the plaintiffs, like Adam, remember their alleged abuser vividly.

While incarcerated at Green Hill in 2000, Adam, who also asked to only be identified by his first name, alleges he was repeatedly abused at 16 by a doctor under the guise of getting “physicals.” Five other people accuse the same doctor in the lawsuit. The Seattle Times does not typically name people accused of crimes who have not been charged.

The doctor has also been previously accused of abusing a minor in his care outside of juvenile rehabilitation. In 2021, Washington paid a total of over \$2 million to 10 people who sued the state alleging sexual abuse while in the Green Hill School. One of them described remarkably similar abuse by the same doctor as Adam did: When he was 15, he was abused under the guise of routine medical examinations, according to the lawsuit filed in Pierce County in 2018. The state later settled the case by paying \$200,000.

“I’ve been punished a lot for my bad decisions, and those are my bad decisions,” Adam said. “I’ve always accepted my punishments for them, so it does suck that he won’t be punished for his.”

Adam described a terrifying and isolating environment at Green Hill, and said he was abused several times by the doctor, who repeatedly asked him to come to his office despite Adam not needing medical attention. In later years, Adam said he coped with his trauma with drugs whenever he remembered the abuse. Many of his crimes in adulthood related to drug use.

Adam said he spent decades feeling humiliated and ashamed of the abuse he faced. He didn’t tell anyone about what had happened until he confided in his wife after he got involved with the lawsuit. He said he has tattooed his entire body to appear threatening — hoping he can escape the feelings of weakness that arose from his abuse.

Now, he won’t see a male doctor. At 37, he avoids physicals and is afraid to let a doctor touch him. By participating in the lawsuit, he hopes to take some of his power back: to “bury it in a healthy way, not like a scared little boy buries it,” he said.

“His name has never left my head, never,” Adam said. “I buried a lot of it down to where it’s even hard to trench up the exact specifics. But his name always just rang in my head, like the one thing that I never forgot.”

‘The opposite of rehabilitation’

A 2019 federal audit of Green Hill found that the prison met federal standards “on paper, but not in practice.” The school failed when it came to “supervision and monitoring.” Video cameras were not actively monitored and staffing levels were not always at federally mandated ratios demonstrated to deter sexual assault.

The Department of Children, Youth and Families has this summer come under fire for its management of the Green Hill School, where overcrowding has led to what even the agency leader has called “terrible” conditions. This year, two staff members were arrested for custodial misconduct after allegedly having inappropriate sexual relationships with a young man incarcerated at Green Hill.

“We’re making bad kids out of our good kids when we send them to these places where they are isolated from their communities, isolated from their families and not given any true help,” Firnhaber Oslund said. “I think what the state has done so far has been the opposite of rehabilitation.”

In a recent interview with The Seattle Times, DCYF secretary Ross Hunter discussed the two custodial misconduct cases and reiterated the department’s zero-tolerance policy, saying management tries to have “multiple eyes all the time so you don’t create an opportunity for that.” But several of the 188 people now suing the state said they worry abuse is still happening, and they want the state to do more.

“People need to know that this happened, because the more people that know this happened makes it less likely that it’s going to happen again,” Fletcher said. “If you overturn a rock, all the creepy crawly things have to go away, because people see it, light comes in on it.”