

# Lawsuit alleges decades of child sex abuse

BY SOPHIA TAREEN  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — Child sexual abuse at Illinois juvenile detention centers was pervasive and systemic for decades, according to disturbing accounts in a lawsuit filed Monday by 95 men and women housed at the youth centers as children.

The lawsuit details alleged incidents of abuse from 1996 to 2017, including gang rape, forced oral sex, beatings and groping of children by corrections officers, sergeants, nurses, therapists, a chaplain and others at nine youth centers. Many plaintiffs said they were threatened or rewarded to keep quiet.

“The State of Illinois has allowed a culture of abuse at Illinois Youth Centers to flourish unabated,” the 186-page complaint said.

The lawsuit, filed in the Illinois Court of Claims, follows similar harrowing allegations of child sex abuse at juvenile detention centers in Maryland, New Jersey, New Hampshire, California and New York City. Some cases have gone to trial or resulted in settlements; arrests have been infrequent.

The Illinois lawsuit contends the state failed to supervise, discipline, remove or investigate alleged abusers, enabling the abuse to continue. The complaint alleges the abuse happened at youth centers in locations all over the state including Chicago, Joliet, Harrisburg, Murphysboro and Warrenville. Several loca-



AP Photo/ Charles Rex Arbogast

The office building at 100 North Western Avenue in Chicago, on Monday where an office of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice is located.

tions have since closed.

The lawsuit names the state of Illinois, the state’s Department of Corrections and Department of Juvenile Justice as defendants. It seeks damages of roughly \$2 million per plaintiff, the most allowed under law.

In an emailed statement, the Department of Juvenile Justice said the alleged incidents took place under former department leaders but that the current administration takes youth safety seriously and that “all allegations of staff misconduct are immediately and thoroughly

investigated” with other agencies, including state police.

Spokespersons for Gov. J.B. Pritzker and the Department of Corrections referred reporters to the Department of Juvenile Justice’s statement.

At an unrelated news conference Monday, Pritzker, who first took office in 2019, told reporters “it was a matter that involved a prior administration.” He said leadership of the Department of Juvenile Justice over the past five years “has been excellent” but declined to say more, citing pending

litigation.

The 95 plaintiffs are among hundreds of victims of sexual abuse at Illinois detention centers, said Jerome H. Block, an attorney who brought the case and who expects to file more lawsuits. His firm has helped bring lawsuits in Maryland, New Jersey and New York City.

“The very people that were entrusted with keeping our clients safe when they were children were the ones perpetrating the sexual abuse,” Block said. “This is long-term institutionalized sexual abuse.”

The Associated Press does not typically name people who say they were sexually assaulted unless they consent to being identified or decide to tell their stories publicly.

Three of the 95 plaintiffs are named in the lawsuit, including Jeffery Christian of Maywood, who said it was important to come forward publicly because he thought it could help others who may be suffering in silence.

The 36-year-old suburban Chicago man said he was sexually abused at two different detention centers beginning when

he was about 13, including by a counselor who groped and fondled him during counseling sessions.

Like many of the plaintiffs, Christian said the abuse was reported at the time, but facility administrators did nothing to address it. He said reporting the abuse made him more of a target. After the incidents, he became withdrawn and anti-social. “It prepared me to start looking at the world different,” he said. “It took some light out of me.”

At least six deten-

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