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Adopted Kids' Ranch in U.S. Denied License

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The Ranch for Kids cares for adopted children, many of whom are Russian.

HELENA, Montana — The Russian government isn't alone in raising questions about a ranch in the western U.S. state of Montana that cares for troubled children adopted from foreign countries.

Montana regulators are actively involved in a legal battle to shut down the Ranch For Kids near the Canadian border, according to documents obtained by The Associated Press through a public information request.

Those records show that the ranch in Eureka has been operating without a license since 2010. The state board that oversees private alternative adolescent residential and outdoor programs ordered it last year to stop operating until it obtains a proper license.

Ranch owner Joyce Sterkel is appealing that order in court, saying the ranch has become part of a church mission and is no longer under the board's authority. Sterkel did not immediately return a call for comment.

Last month, children rights ombudsman Pavel Astakhov and human rights envoy Konstantin Dolgov showed up at the Ranch For Kids' gates, demanding entry to check on the adopted children from Russia in Sterkel's care. They questioned whether the children were receiving necessary care or treatment at the remote ranch.

Ten of the 25 children there are from Russia, with others from China, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Haiti, Ethiopia and other countries. Their ages vary, and their troubles range from fetal alcohol spectrum disorder to the aftereffects of spending their early lives in difficult conditions in orphanages.

The Russians were denied access that day, with Sterkel previously denying any claims that the children were mistreated or lacking care. Parents with children at the ranch currently or in the past have risen to Sterkel's defense, saying her program provides a necessary service for adopted children struggling with medical and behavioral problems.

But neither Sterkel nor the Russians mentioned the Ranch For Kids' dispute with state regulators that now stretches back more than two years, after the Board of Private Alternative Adolescent Residential and Outdoor Programs declined to renew the ranch's provisional license in June 2010.

An inspection that was part of the license application process found deficiencies that included a failure to show that the ranch's buildings were up to code, lack of a disaster plan, no background checks or commercial drivers' licenses for employees and no student handbook or statement on the rights of the program participants.

Beyond that, Sterkel denied the board any information about the children at the ranch. Board attorney Mary Tapper described the refusal in court documents in which she referred to the ranch as "RFK."

"RFK flatly refused to inform the board how many children were enrolled at RFK, including their ages and gender. Because many of the children enrolled at RFK are reported to have severe emotional and disciplinary challenges, the board sought this information for the protection of the health, safety and welfare of the children," Tapper wrote.

The board gave the ranch operators a three-month probationary license to give them time to prove they had corrected the deficiencies, and then extended that license until Nov. 15, 2010, according to board documents and court filings.

Sterkel requested a full hearing on the deficiencies, but Tapper said Sterkel did not provide requested information, or else provided contradictory information, in the discovery process.

Through her attorney, Sterkel in March 2011 requested the hearing be canceled. The hearing examiner ruled in favor of the board, which issued the cease-and-desist order in June 2011.

Since then, the matter has been in state court. Sterkel says the board inquiry violated her due process because it was only supposed to be about building codes, which the board denies.

Sterkel also said the cease and desist order was not properly served to her, which the board also denies.

But Sterkel's main defense is that her ranch is no longer under the board's authority because in October 2011, she signed an agreement with a missionary group affiliated with a small church in Eureka. That agreement makes the Ranch For Kids an adjunct missionary of the Epicenter International Missions Ministry, an organization that works with lepers and orphans in India.

State law says that a program that is an adjunct missionary is exempt from board licensing requirements, ranch attorney J. Tiffin Hall wrote in a legal filing.

The judge in the case has not yet made any rulings.

The dispute between the ranch, state regulators and the Russians is happening as a bilateral adoption agreement between the U.S. and Russia is going through the ratification process. Negotiations for the deal began in 2010 in response to Russian outrage after American Torry Hansen sent her then 7-year-old adopted son, Artyom Savelyev, back to Russia with a letter saying he was violent and disturbed and she didn't want to be his mother anymore.

Yevgeny Uspensky, an official with the Russian consulate in Seattle, said last week that his government had requested assistance from Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer in arranging a visit to the ranch. Uspensky said the government considers the children Russian citizens even though they have been adopted by U.S. parents and have American citizenship, and they have the right to check on their situation.

Sterkel and parents with children at the ranch question the Russians' motives, calling it a political stunt timed to coincide with the ratification of the adoption agreement, and the parents say the attention could have the effect of damaging the reputation of a program that is necessary for children who are having trouble adapting to everyday life.

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