

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Human Services Gives Conflicting Messages On Whether It Has Commenced An Investigation Into AZ Academy's Big Island Adventure Camp Incident

VIC News / **Published On July 26, 2017 09:45 PM /**

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ST. CROIX -- After multiple reports on The Consortium with quotes from an AZ Academy Teacher and Camp Director, Julie Landreneau, stating that the camp had "dropped the ball" and "blew it" following an incident that saw minors, during a weekend getaway at North Side Valley, participating in lewd sexual activity such as lap dancing, and using drugs and alcohol, Department of Human Services Public Information Officer Carole Burke, first said that she was not aware of any investigation because nothing had been reported to the office of the commissioner, but in a later call said an investigation had commenced.

"We have not received any information from any source to this day to my knowledge," Ms. Burke said. "Once we have received a concerned inquiry by any of the parties that were involved -- whether it was a parent or someone who was attending, or anybody -- we have not had anything come forward to us as we speak."

Ms. Burke's statement that D.H.S. had not received a complaint from a parent, is not accurate. At least one parent spoke at length with a D.H.S. employee in the Child Care and Regulatory Services division on Friday, detailing what had happened. Furthermore, last week The Consortium informed Ms. Burke that a parent had filed a lengthy complaint with the aforementioned division.

D.H.S. Public Relations Officer, Carol Burke

Asked whether D.H.S., after seeing a media report about an incident, would not at least inquire to determine for itself what had taken place, Ms. Burke said, "It's not that won't inquire, just since a police report was filed, we are waiting for the police to make contact with D.H.S., who is the licensing agency." When asked if D.H.S. could not conduct its own investigation, Ms. Burke said since a report was filed with the V.I.P.D, D.H.S. was no longer the lead agency on the matter.

"Once a report is filed with the police, we either wait for their report to be concluded, or we do it together." She said D.H.S. had not contacted Mr. Richards to discuss conducting the investigation as a joint matter. "But that's not to say that Human Services won't conduct its own investigation," Ms. Burke added. Pressed on when an investigation would commence. Ms. Burke said the parties that are involved -- including AZ Academy -- should be given an opportunity to come to D.H.S. Ms. Burke then asserted that it hasn't been a week since the incident was reported, suggesting that the department should be given more time.

In a later call, however, Ms. Burke said that an investigation had commenced, but because of the sensitivity of the information, details could not be shared. She later sent the same information through a text message.

Police Commissioner Delroy Richards said he would be in contact with the detectives responsible for looking into the incident on Thursday.

The incident, which occurred during the weekend of July 7-9, has devastated the families involved, who saw the AZ Academy Big Island Adventure Camp as a safe haven for their children, where adequate supervision was expected.

"I'm going to tell you that there was drugs, there was alcohol, there was sex, there was lap dancing going on, pretending that we're at a sex bar or whatever. I don't know what it was... I think the lap dancing, the truth or dare was going on with my staff. Certainly not the example that I teach," Ms. Landreneau said during a meeting with parents, the camp's staff as well as campers, at the AZ Academy school.

The marijuana that was used at the getaway at North Side Valley, where at least two of the AZ Academy employees smoked the drug with minor campers, was brought to the camp by an AZ Academy employee, said Ms. Landreneau said at the meeting.

Ms. Landreneau also said that the marijuana was not given to the minors. "One of my staff members brought it. They did not give it kids... but they smoked pot... one night. Yeah," she said.

But later in the same meeting, one of the minors, who had received a lap dance from a teenage girl at the camp, said he could not remember all what took place because he was high on marijuana. Asked where he got it from, the minor pointed to 19-year-old AZ Academy employee KD Perez. Mr. Perez was also said to have received a lap dance from one of the teens, but it was not clear whether the teen was one of the older Counselor in Training (CIT) employees, at 18-years-old, or a minor. The lap dancing, however, was performed in the presence of the minors, according to one of the minors in the room, who also said that she had given a lap dance to a male teen.

The information shared in this story comes directly from an audio recording of the Thursday meeting at AZ Academy, parts of which was shared with The Consortium by a concerned parent whose own child was a victim of the incident that occurred at North Side Valley.

The supervision at the camp, especially during the night, was highly inadequate. There was no parent chaperons, and only two persons over the age of 18 — Mr. Perez, and a 26-year-old whose first name is Addison. Someone who manages the North Side Valley property, called "Ginger" during the meeting — an adult female whose age was not revealed — came occasionally to check on the teenagers. The negligence turned what was supposed to be an experience with children that would help them grow and learn new skills, into a damaging exposure to sex, drugs and alcohol for the teenagers, leaving parents — most of whom learned what took place only on Thursday — in shock.

At one point during a night on the weekend, the teens were playing truth or dare, which is where the lap dancing took place. It was also where Mr. Perez received the lap dance, according to a female teen at the meeting, who herself gave a lap dance to male minor teen. Kissing also took place during the truth or dare game, but a male teen, who was pressed to provide more information during the meeting, said he could not remember all the details of the incident because he was high on marijuana.

"The reason why I can't remember most of it is because before that happened, we were smoking," he said. Asked by a parent where were the adults while the teens were smoking, Addison, the 26-year-old Caucasian male, said, "I was smoking with them, actually."

AZ Academy [issued a statement late Saturday](#) stating that it had investigated the "alleged" irresponsible behavior of staff, and that it had retained attorney Gordon Rhea, "to ensure that AZ's investigation is as thorough and well guided as possible." The statement was credited to AZ Academy Executive Director Paula Heller, who was also present at the Thursday meeting.

"We blew it. I can tell you that my staff blew it," Ms. Landreneau said. She then started calling the names of staff members present at the meeting — she named 7 — asking them, "Do you know better?" They all answered yes.

She added, “I believe some of the responsibility.... I’m going to take all of it, but when are we ever going to hold young people responsible...?” Ms. Landreneau was immediately rebuked by a parent.

The North Side Valley, located on the north shore of Frederiksted past the V.I. National Guard facility, is a maze of cabins on a highly secluded, hilly estate. The estate’s expansive grounds, dotted with mango trees, palm trees, grass and bushes, appear to be perfect for a getaway that frees its guests from the outside world; there is no cellphone reception in the area. Livid parents said AZ Academy should have had more adult supervision, people older than 17, 18, and 19 years old. Ms. Landreneau herself would leave the camp at about 9:00 p.m. every night.

“All I could say is I’m sorry. I don’t even know what to say to you; all I can say is that I am sorry that your children, on my watch, were not taken care of, and that my staff that I trusted did not handle themselves appropriately, and maybe I expected too much,” Ms. Landreneau said. Weapons were also said to be at the weekend adventure, including a gun and a knife

The incident has caused concern among residents and law enforcement officials alike, with the Department of Justice following the case closely.

But by Saturday night, the school had changed its talk. In a release issued to the families of CITs, Ms. Landreneau started referring to the incident as accusations, even after some of the CITs staff and teen campers openly admitted at the meeting to what had happened.

“All of our administrative staff have been working diligently with all parties involved along with the Department of Human Services and our legal counsel, Gordon Rhea, esquire, to address these *accusations and uncover the truth*,” reads the message to CIT families.

The school apologized to the families for informing them late about the incident, stating, “It is with a very heavy heart to us that many of you found out through other means and not directly from us. Our sincerest apology.”

At least one parent, whose 14-year-old was exposed to the behavior — with one of the male teenagers initially bragging about having sex with the child, only to change his version of what happened as the pressure intensified — reported the matter in detail to the V.I.P.D. as well as the Dept. of Human Services, Child Care and Regulatory Services division.

Whether there were other lewd behavior at the camp remains unknown, as some of those involved admitted to being high on marijuana and alcohol with little recollection of some of the things that took place. Furthermore, not all parents of children involved- – roughly 15 — were at the meeting, leaving open the question whether all parents knew what took place.

The school will not be taking any questions, however. Instead, all inquiries for comment have been directed to Mr. Rhea.