

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

November 5, 1998

Huckabee Criticized by Legislative Group

By James Jefferson

LITTLE ROCK - A legislative report concludes Gov. Mike Huckabee and his administration knew of widespread abuses of children in state custody and mismanagement in the state Youth Services Division for months before taking action to remedy the problem.

The Senate Interim Committee on Children and Youth and the House Interim Committee on Aging, Children and Youth and Legislative and Military Affairs held joint hearings between July and September to determine who knew what about abuses at DYS and when.

The committee's findings, based on more than 37 hours of testimony and documentation from key human services officials - past and present - were contained in the draft report made available Wednesday.

It concludes that Huckabee and others within his administration failed to take affirmative action to remedy the abuse and that some Human Services Department employees tried to cover up problems at DYS.

The report also concludes that DYS staff members were never adequately trained to handle delinquent juveniles, that the agency suffered from chronic understaffing and that the operation lacked proper written policies and procedures.

Huckabee spokesman, Jim Harris, disagreed with the findings.

"We've consistently said that when he (Huckabee) found out the specifics of what was going on, he took action," Harris said.

Meanwhile, Paul G. Doramus, a former state legislator whom Huckabee hired in May to overhaul DYS, submitted his resignation to Huckabee, effective immediately.

In his letter, dated Wednesday, Doramus said the agency had made progress toward returning youth to their communities mentally, emotionally and physically healthier than in the past.

"We have made great strides toward creating a new juvenile justice system for the children of Arkansas," he added.

But Doramus said the job had been a strain on him.

"As you can imagine, the past five months have been some of the most intense and challenging of my life," he wrote. "The personal sacrifices made by my family and myself have been great" and to continue making them was "no longer an option."

Doramus could not be reached for comment late Wednesday. He was not at his DYS office and no one answered calls to his home in Benton.

Harris said the governor was surprised by Doramus' sudden departure but referred questions to the Human Services Department, which oversees DYS.

DHS spokesman Joe Quinn said Doramus' resignation from the \$ 78,000-a-year post also was a surprise to the agency. "He was not asked to resign, there was no pressure on him to resign," Quinn said.

Huckabee named Doramus to head DYS in May, the month after the governor acknowledged widespread abuse and complaints of unsanitary conditions at some Youth Services buildings.

Doramus, 41, was executive director of the Boys and Girls Club of Saline County. He served from 1985-89 in the state House of Representatives, elected from a west Little Rock district as a Democrat.

He replaced Larance Johnson, who was removed from the post April 22 after allegations of physical abuse of juveniles and complaints of unsanitary conditions in some of the agency's buildings.

On April 24, Huckabee pledged a top-to-bottom shakeup at the division, amid what he said was evidence of systematic mistreatment of children in the state's care.

Two months later, Huckabee and Doramus shut down DYS' Central Arkansas Observation and Assessment Center in North Little Rock and moved assessment of juvenile delinquents to the Alexander Youth Services Center.

Then-DHS Director Lee Frazier abruptly resigned in July, less than a year after taking over the human services agency.

Huckabee has consistently denied knowing specific problems existed at DYS prior to his April announcement, although documents he signed appeared to show he was informed of confirmed allegations of abuse as early as August 1997.

Among its recommendations, the joint panel suggested upgrading and increasing personnel and training and an emphasis on rehabilitation rather than simple confinement.