

Assembly Bill 262 - Children's Camp Regulation and Protection

Assemblymember Chris R. Holden

SUMMARY

Assembly Bill 262 will direct the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), to develop regulations to protect the welfare of children while attending day and overnight camps in California. The bill also directs the Department to solicit input from other state agencies and stakeholders to provide advice that will help to inform the child welfare regulations.

BACKGROUND

Children's camps in California are loosely regulated with little to no oversight. Overnight camps are required to submit their operating procedures to County Public Health Departments and comply with some safety regulations from the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), but County Departments rarely enforce that requirement or verify that camp operators adhere to safety standards. California largely relies on the American Camp Association (ACA) accreditation process to ensure that camps are safe for children, but the organization hardly ever conducts on-site visits and only requires camps to submit an annual self-attestation of compliance.

While overnight camps are regulated to some degree in California, child day camps are not. Under state law, a camp is defined as a site established for the primary purposes of providing an outdoor group living experience for five days or more during one or more seasons of the year, which crucially leaves out day camps. California heavily regulates child day care centers where children enjoy low-risk activities like finger painting or sing-alongs, but for day camps that provide high-risk activities, such as rifle ranges and horseback riding, safety regulation is practically absent.

The lack of safety at a day camp in Altadena, California led to the completely preventable death of a 6-year old in 2019. Although the Los Angeles County Health Department subsequently found nine different violations at the pool the child drowned in, such as a

pool gate that did not close, the day camp never paused its operations and continued to host child campers. Only three days after the child died the camp reopened the pool and before fixing all nine safety violations. If robust safety standards had been enacted sooner, Roxie would still be alive today.

Still troubling, there have been numerous incidents of abuse and sexual molestation of child campers in California, but current law only mandates a camp administrator report instances of abuse or neglect, not other camp employees. In 2017, a former San Jose camp counselor plead guilty to molesting multiple child victims.¹ In 2018, a former San Mateo camp counselor plead no contest to molesting three 6-year old children and a fourth child at a summer camp.² That same year, a jury awarded \$25.3 million to a man sexually abused by a former camp administrator in Los Angeles County when he was a child.³ Background checks are important safeguards that help prevent tragic instances like these.

EXISTING LAW

Health and Safety Code Sec. 18897: This section defines the type of camps that are regulated by statute.

THE SOLUTION

It is critical that California enact oversight and accountability of children's camps to help prevent future tragedies. AB 262 directs CDSS to convene a working group of state departments, agencies and stakeholders to develop regulations that will protect children at camp.

SUPPORT

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¹ <https://www.mv-voice.com/news/2017/02/03/ex-counselor-at-county-science-camp-sentenced-for-child-molestation>

² <https://www.sfgate.com/news/bayarea/article/After-School-Coach-Camp-Counselor-Pleads-No-13031186.php>

³ <https://www.presstelegram.com/2018/06/07/jury-awards-25-3-million-verdict-in-sex-abuse-lawsuit-against-westerly-school-in-long-beach-seal-beach-sports-camp-founder/>