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CORRALLING MAVERICK CHILD CARE HOME OPERATORS

I focused on consumer and environmental protection during my first year as attorney general because the abuses in those areas cried out for attention but were ignored by our state's leaders in deference to business lobbyists. I quickly learned there were other abuses that also cried out for attention but simply were not heard because they could not compete against all the other issues that held our attention.

Such was the case of a stealth industry that had sprung up almost entirely unnoticed in the late 1960s and early 1970s to accommodate parents, social service agencies, and courts unprepared for the tidal wave of teenage runaways. I was caught unaware, as were most state government leaders, when this issue exploded in the summer of my first term.

Governmental regulation of these facilities for troubled youth was scant, allowing many of them to be owned and operated by untrained or unqualified amateurs unprepared for the level of physical and psychological challenges posed by the often turbulent personalities of these young people. Occasionally in self-defense or fear, often because they succumbed to frustration at their inability to cope, and perhaps because they were overcome by the temptation to punish a vulnerable younger person, the keepers of these facilities sometimes resorted to brutality.

Regrettably, the state's fledgling efforts to protect children in these privately managed facilities sometimes were compromised by a combination of factors. These included political interference, an ambiguous attitude in state government toward aggressive enforcement of regulatory laws, and parents so desperate to solve a problem with a child that they turned a blind eye to evidence of abuse or approved of its use as a deserved punishment for misbehavior.¹