

# Case of Abused Boy

A jury hit FamiliesFirst, one of California's largest mental health-care providers, for neglect and fraud.

By Joseph Lapine  
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*Deshawn Burton stands near Mount Pleasant, Utah, in 2013. (Kim Jeff, special to ProPublica)*

A jury in Sacramento, California, last week awarded more than \$10 million to the family of a 16-year-old boy who had been sexually assaulted by a peer at his group home in Doris. The jury found that operators of the group home failed to look after the boy as the facility for troubled youngsters descended into a prolonged period of chaos and violence.

The boy, Deshawn Burton, was 11 at the time of his 15-month stay at the home, but functioned at the level of a 5-year-old, making him especially vulnerable to children with records of violence and predation, the jury found. One night in May 2013, he disappeared for several hours. As it turned out, he was in a public bathroom of a nearby park, where he was victimized by an older, larger female resident of the home. His parents weren't notified by the home's staff for 24 hours after he left.

The jury found CHQ FamiliesFirst — one of the largest mental health providers in the state — guilty of neglect, fraud and intentional infliction of emotional distress. It awarded the Burtons damages in the amount of \$4.55 million and a separate, punitive verdict of \$7.5 million.

Deshawn Burton, by age 3, had lived with a half-dozen foster families before being adopted by his parents, Vonnie and Larnest Burton, in 2004. A nurse and a firefighter, the Burtons were dedicated to Deshawn, but they struggled to tend to his extreme