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SPECIAL REPORT

A sane, innocent woman went on suicide watch in Kern County jail. It nearly broke her.

The Sheriff's Office isolates hundreds of people using this type of custody each year. They are held for days or weeks in rooms without mattresses and sometimes toilets. The state can't stop it.



JOHN WALKER / THE FRESNO BEE

Christine Taylor spent five days in May 2017 in suicide watch isolation at a Kern County jail. County prosecutors later dropped the charges. To this day, she says she was never suicidal.

BY JASON POHL • The Sacramento Bee | AND RYAN GABRIELSON • ProPublica

SHACKLED AT THE WRISTS AND ANKLES, Christine Taylor followed a red line on the basement floor directing her to the elevator at Kern County's central jail. She heard groans and cries from among the hundred people locked above, a wail echoing through the shaft. • It was minutes before daybreak on a Monday morning in May 2017 as the elevator lifted her toward the voices. Jail staff had assigned Taylor to something called "suicide watch," a block of single cells where she'd be alone 24 hours a day. The sound of other people would soon become a luxury. • What a stupid mistake, Taylor fumed. • Earlier, she had argued with jail staff during her booking at the downtown jail. Have you ever attempted suicide, a deputy asked. Taylor glared back, her hands trembling. She had never been in serious trouble with law enforcement, and she considered her arrest that night a gross misunderstanding.

"Do you think I'm going to try to kill myself with my shirt?" Taylor responded, flippantly. "Maybe."

Her answer got her a glimpse of how the jail handles people it perceives as suicide risks.

Within minutes, deputies moved Taylor into a changing room on the third floor and had her strip naked. They handed her just two items: paper-thin clothes that come apart under pressure and a blue yoga mat.

Exhausted and scared, she followed orders, walked down a hall and stepped into a bathroom-sized isolation cell. The door slammed behind her. The floors felt colder inside, and a mold smell came up from the toilet-sink fixture. A bed was mounted to the brick wall. Hazy fluorescent lights reflected off the ash-white paint. And, as Taylor soon learned, jail staff never turned them off.

To shield herself, she crawled under the bed and put the yoga mat over her torso like a blanket.

She pressed her eyelids shut but couldn't block the glare or the rush of tears.

'CRUEL AND UNUSUAL' PUNISHMENT; NO LIMITS

Each year, the Kern County Sheriff's Office sends hundreds of people into this kind of suicide watch isolation. Inmates awaiting trial spend weeks and sometimes months in solitary, according to state and county records. When those cells fill up, deputies place people into "overflow" areas, rooms with nothing more than four rubberized walls and a grate in the floor for bodily fluids. They receive no mental health treatment, only a yoga mat to rest on.

Please see **JAILS | A3**

KERN HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

New policy draws clear boundaries between employees, students

BY STACEY SHEPARD AND EMA SASIC
 The Bakersfield Californian

The text messaging started about two months after school started in the fall of 2018, the girl told police. By early November, the messages implored the 16-year-old girl, a Liberty High student, to come to the home of the man sending the texts: the school's young and popular varsity basketball coach, Jeff Hicks, who was also a math teacher at the school.

The girl demurred. But then Hicks would retaliate by unfriending or no longer following her on social media platforms, she later told police. So one night, after midnight, she went to his home. While there, Hicks kissed her and pulled her on top of him on his bed. He kept trying to kiss her, and at one point, tried to take off her shorts, the girl later said, according to a police report of the incident.

Hicks was accused of crossing a serious line. He later admitted to the texting and then kissing the teen at his house, according to police reports, but denied other inappropriate conduct took place. He pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor charge of lewd conduct earlier this year and was sentenced to four years of probation. His teacher credential was revoked by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and he must register as a sex offender.

But the initial exchanges that led up to it — exchanging phone numbers, texting, friending each other on social media — were a much murkier boundary, one that some teachers, coaches and other school employees might cross every day.

At least until last week. That's when the Kern High School District adopted a sweeping new policy about adult-student boundaries, which touches on everything from what constitutes inappropriate behavior during in-person interactions to recommendations on social media, phone and electronic communications.

Please see **BOUNDARIES | A7**

IMPEACHMENT INQUIRY

House GOP asks for Hunter Biden and whistleblower to testify

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HIGH SCHOOL VOLLEYBALL

Bakersfield Christian tops Stockdale in wild Central Section D-II final

SPORTS | D1

VIEWPOINTS

It's cold, they're homeless and we'll study it

It might be instructive, amid all this discussion about homelessness and emergency shelters, to get the perspective of the world's best-known homeless advocate, a man who was briefly a transient himself. He was not available for an interview, but a spokesman, Matthew son of Alphaeus, did provide a written statement on the issue:

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and

you came to me."

Notice that Jesus of Nazareth did not add, "I was a political hot potato so you initiated another study."

Jesus, on one memorable occasion as a minor, was lucky that he and his parents were able to bed down with some amiable livestock. Many homeless folk in Bakersfield are sleeping on sidewalks and in doorways. And here comes winter. Homelessness, with all its

causes and consequences, is California's most urgent concern: Across the state, at any given time, 130,000 people can be so categorized. Its facets include poverty, drug abuse, alcoholism, mental illness, inadequate veterans' services, family dysfunction, domestic violence, sex abuse and a pervasive shortage of affordable housing.

Those problems must be approached individually and as interconnected elements,

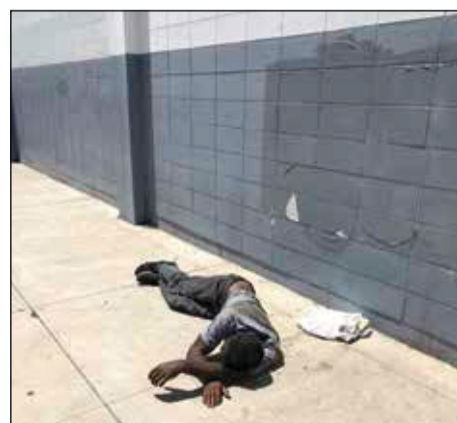
but in the meantime it's cold outside.

City Councilman Willie Rivera objects to the immediate purchase and conversion of a huge, underutilized cotton warehouse into an emergency shelter in his southeast Bakersfield ward. He correctly states that the city must carefully consider the decision; better options might be out there.

But, as City Councilman Bob Smith pointed out Wednesday night, shortly before the council voted to delay further action on a proposed shelter



ROBERT PRICE
 THE CALIFORNIAN



ROBERT PRICE / THE CALIFORNIAN

A transient sleeps on a sidewalk in downtown Bakersfield.

Please see **PRICE | A5**

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PRICE: \$2

BOUNDARIES

Continued from **PAGE A1**

KHSD officials wouldn't say if the new policy was directly related to the spate of incidents involving its own employees in recent years. Instead, officials said in a statement in response to an inquiry from The Californian that the policy is an "ongoing commitment to communicating clear expectations with staff, students, parents, and the community about adult-student interactions."

"Considering ongoing generational shifts in what are considered by some to be standard methods of communication, this policy is meant to further define expected professionalism when communicating electronically," the statement said.

"I think it's the latest iteration in a technological age given cellphones and Facebook," KHSD trustee Jeff Flores explained, adding that the policy was crafted and approved to maximize student safety. "You can have benign friendships or communications back and forth that are completely friendly, but we want that added protection."

'A CULTURE SHIFT'

There's good reason to want an additional level of protection — for student safety but also for school district liability.

Through a public records request to the Kern High School District and in combing through archived media reports and court filings, The Californian found more than 10 incidents in recent years of alleged sexual misconduct by employees of the Kern High and McFarland Unified school districts involving students.

Some are inappropriate comments or moments of poor judgment. But some of the most egregious incidents have a common thread of discrete communications via texts and social media. And they could cost the districts millions in civil lawsuits.

Take the case of Edwin Rodriguez, a former athletic equipment manager at North High School who now faces 11 felony and 13 misdemeanor counts of sexual misconduct with up to 10 students.

An investigation by the Kern County Sheriff's Office determined that Rodriguez had sent explicit messages, including photos and videos, to eight juvenile students through the social media platform Snapchat and that he had sexual contact with several of the students dating back to 2015. Snapchat is a platform where messages, photos and videos automatically delete after they are viewed by the recipient. He also allegedly sent text messages to girls telling them he thought they were "hot" or commented on various parts of their bodies he found attractive, according to Sheriff's Office reports filed in Kern County Superior Court.

He has pleaded not guilty to the charges. In addition to criminal charges, plaintiff's attorney Daniel Rodriguez (no relationship to Edwin Rodriguez) represents five of the alleged victims in a civil case against Edwin Rodriguez and the Kern High School District. Chain Cohn Stiles, a local personal injury firm, represents two more of Edwin Rodriguez's alleged victims plus Hick's victim in separate civil suits.

In another case last year, McFarland High boys basketball coach Fernando Pruneda allegedly promised a 15-year-old boy a spot on the varsity team in exchange for sexual favors, all through text messages, sheriff's reports state.

According to the Sheriff's Office, Pruneda sent suggestive texts to the student, a junior varsity basketball player, over the course of several months.

When the boy asked for help to improve his skills in basketball via text, Pruneda agreed and told the victim that he would make him a varsity player, according to sheriff's reports filed in court. However, he had a condition: sexual contact with the teenager. If the teenager agreed, Pruneda texted, "I'll get you where you want to be."

"I enjoyed that I was getting help that no one else was offering," the student told deputies after seeking help when Pruneda's requests for sexual favors increased, according to sheriff's reports.

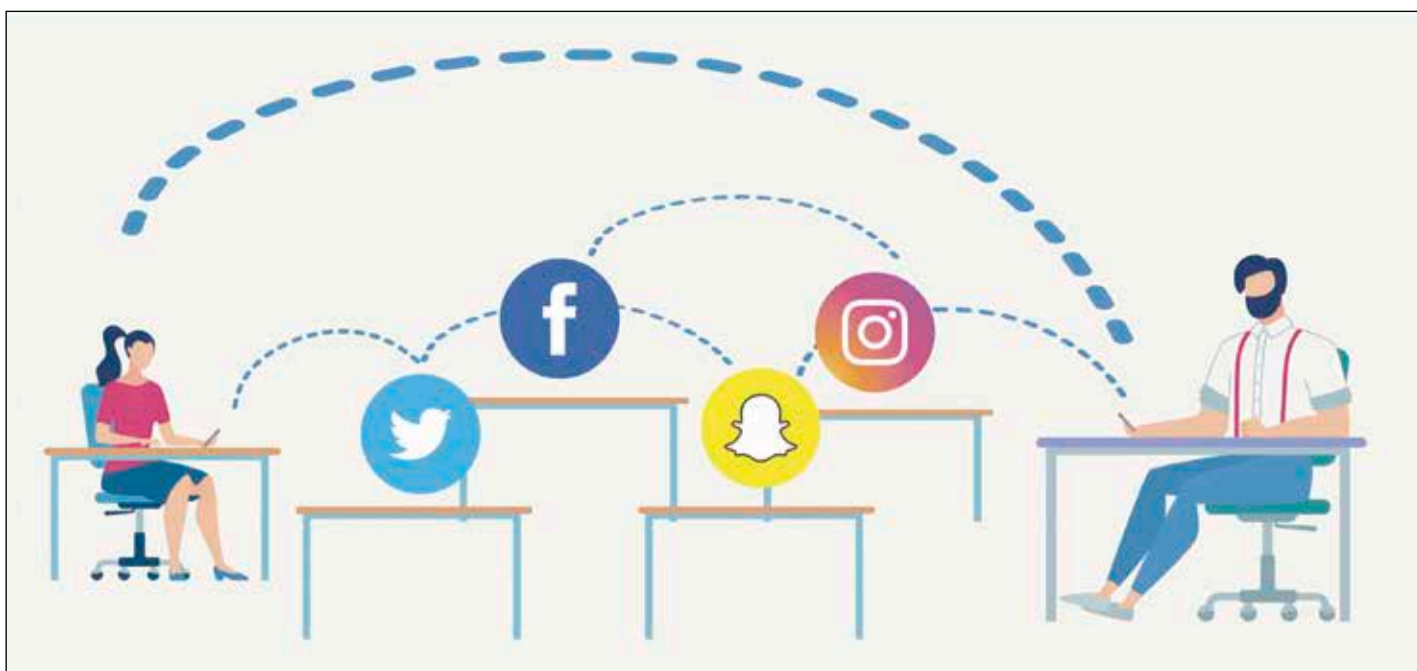
Pruneda was arrested and has pleaded not guilty to three felony charges and a misdemeanor related to the incident. A jury trial is scheduled for February.

Matt Clark, an attorney with Chain Cohn Stiles, said he's definitely seen an uptick in cases involving sexual misconduct by school employees.

"There's definitely something going on... The only thing I can attribute it to is social media and electronic exchanges with students," Clark said.

Social media and texting "allows a predator to more easily find their prey and groom their prey," he said.

However, he is unsure if actual incidents of misconduct are increasing or if trace-



JULIE MANA-AY PEREZ / THE CALIFORNIAN

“ Teachers shouldn't communicate with students by themselves and they shouldn't be caught in a classroom by themselves. You're there for the sole purpose of teacher. You're not their friends, you're not their buddy, you're not their savior, you're their teacher.”

— **Janice Graves**, a Kern High School District trustee and former teacher.

able electronic communications makes them easier to track down and prove.

McFarland Unified School District Superintendent S. Aaron Resendez called it "a culture shift that's happening."

"Electronics are really driving the social media part of this," Resendez said. At McFarland, an all-staff training on interactions and boundaries with students is scheduled for later this month, he said.

Years ago, "if I wanted to communicate with a student, I would have to either go to their house or call their home phone number and roll the dice with whomever answered," he said. "Now we have individual communication and even guardians guarding that is difficult."

"You hope that folks have the wisdom to realize, 'OK, my 'spider-sense' is tingling and this exchange shouldn't happen,'" he said.

PERSONAL BOUNDARIES, SPELLED OUT

The new KHSD policy specifically bars employees from connecting on social media with current students, or former students who are not yet adults. It also says employees shouldn't have personal contact with students outside of school by phone, letter or electronic communication unless parents or the school principal are included, and school email and communication devices should always be used for those communications. The policy explicitly bars communication with students through the use of a medium that is designed to eliminate all traces or records of the communication, such as the app Snapchat.

The policy also says adults should not be alone with a student out of the view of others, invite students to visit the employee's home or visit a student's home unless home visits are required for educational purposes so as to avoid the appearance of impropriety, according to the policy.

Other boundary violations, the policy explains, include singling out a particular student for personal attention and friendship, using personal pet names with students, and engaging in a romantic or sexual relationship, which constitutes serious misconduct.

In yet another example from 2014, Ridgeview social studies teacher Stephen Taylor was accused of sending text messages to a student saying, among other things, he stared at her breasts in class and describing sexual experiences with other women when he was in college, according to a Bakersfield police report. When the student's mom went to the school after finding the messages on her phone, Taylor resigned his position and his teaching credential was revoked in 2016. There's no evidence a physical relationship ever took place and the student said she thought it was all just a joke, according to a police report of the incident contained in documents provided by KHSD as part of the public records request.

KHSD POLICY DETAILS

- Activities that can create the appearance of impropriety: being alone with a student out of the view of others; inviting or allowing students to visit the employee's home; remaining on campus with student(s) after the last administrator leaves the school site; and/or visiting a student's home unless home visits are a required and expected duty of the adult.
- Employees should not maintain personal contact with a student outside of school by phone, letter,

electronic communication or other means without including the parent/guardian and/or school principal.

- Employees should not communicate with students through the use of a medium that is designed to eliminate all traces or records of the communication.
- Employees should not follow or accept requests from current students or non-adult former students to be friends or connections on sites.
- District email and

district communication devices are the preferred methods to use when communicating electronically with students.

- Employees are prohibited from dating, courting, or entering into or attempting to form a romantic or sexual relationship with any student, regardless of the student's age.
- Exchanging personal gifts, cards or letters for which it is directly or implicitly suggested that a student is to say or do something in return is a boundary violation.

Taylor refused to provide a statement about the texts to police, the police report said. Police sought charges against Taylor but the Kern County District Attorney's Office declined to prosecute. He resigned his position, documents show, and his teaching credential was eventually revoked by the state.

Some other situations described in the documents KHSD provided to The Californian include:

- In April 2017, a substitute teacher at Foothill High told a class stories about losing his virginity, students reported to school officials. He also allegedly chimed in when some female students were playing the game Simon Says, telling them to lift up their shirts, KHSD documents said. District officials, in a letter to the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, said the man admitted to the alleged behaviors. His substitute teaching credential was eventually revoked.

- Last year, a Highland High security guard was found to have violated the district's sexual harassment policy when he asked a female student walking in the hall, "Why you so curvy?" He denied the allegations to district officials and was transferred to another high school at his request but was ordered to undergo sexual harassment training, district documents said.

- In 2018, a student at Nueva Continuation High School in Lamont reported that after she entered the girls bathroom, a male janitor passing by stopped in the doorway and called into her, "I'm waiting for you." He denied the allegation but video footage showed he did stop at the bathroom door and district officials deemed the student's accusation credible, KHSD documents said.

It's unclear if additional incidents involving KHSD employees and students may have occurred. In its response to The Californian's public records request, KHSD said it did not provide some records such as those that may contain confidential student information, information protected by attorney-client privilege and information related to ongoing investigations.

BOTH SIDES OF THE EQUATION

KHSD trustee Janice Graves, who taught for 40 years, said she helped train new teachers and explained to them there were parameters they had to know.

"Number one was don't put yourself in a position where you would be compromised

and the student can say something happened," she explained. "If a student walks in and wants to talk to you, get up and go outside and talk to them in the hall."

She did not have to worry about social media for most of her career, but in her last few years, she utilized a group messaging tool to communicate with a school sports team she coached.

She used it to let players know practice was canceled or if they were meeting inside or outside. Other than that, there was no reason for her to message or connect with students through social media.

"Teachers shouldn't communicate with students by themselves and they shouldn't be caught in a classroom by themselves. You're there for the sole purpose of teacher," Graves said. "You're not their friends, you're not their buddy, you're not their savior, you're their teacher."

Yet social media can be viewed as a positive or negative tool, depending on how one uses it. And relationships with teachers that extend beyond the classroom can be a positive force in a student's life.

A few bad apples shouldn't spoil the barrel, parent Jennypher Lopez believes.

Last year, a house fire completely turned the lives of Lopez and her children upside down. But teachers from West High, which three of her children attended, stepped in to help the family.

"They got involved with the kids, they got us dinners," Lopez said.

When the mother of a teammate on her daughter's basketball team died, teachers pitched in to give the student rides, Lopez said.

Even when tragedy struck earlier this year with former West High student Aaron Porter's death by stabbing, Lopez said teachers reached out to students on social media and gave them "words of encouragement."

All those interactions are discouraged in the new board policy.

"I understand there have been teachers who have had inappropriate contact, but there are hundreds of teachers and staff that have their best interests at heart and they wouldn't do anything to harm them," Lopez said. "Taking that away is taking away a lot."

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No alcohol-related arrests at checkpoint, but some drivers get in trouble anyway

THE BAKERSFIELD CALIFORNIAN

The Bakersfield Police Department made no alcohol-related arrests during a DUI checkpoint held Friday night in southwest Bakersfield. However, two drivers were detained to be further evaluated, the BPD said in a news release.

According to police, officers screened

1,325 vehicles in the 4600 block of Stockdale Highway.

Between 6 p.m. and 2 a.m., 30 motorists were cited for driving unlicensed and 11 were found to be driving on a suspended license, police said.

One motorist was arrested on a felony warrant.

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