

Court bid to help special needs boy failed by system

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WHILE President Jacob Zuma last week promised to look into ways to solve problems besetting a special needs school during a visit, the sad tale of a boy with special needs will today be the subject of a Pretoria High Court application.

The boy, now 15, has been sent "from pillar to post" since there is nowhere he can be placed due to the lack of facilities for his needs.

He has been to a psychiatric hospital, places of safety, and even spent some time in police cells.

He is now at Weskoppies Hospital, where authorities say they cannot take care of him.

The Centre for Child Law at the University of Pretoria has stepped in and will ask the court to appoint a curator on behalf of the boy to decide what is best for him.

Centre director Dr Ann Skelton said in papers filed at court that there simply did not appear to be any facilities to care for children such as him, with behavioural problems and special needs.

She said the centre intervened as it appeared that the boy, being a child in need of care, was being failed by the system since no suitable permanent placement option was available to him and other children suffering from a mental illness.

He had been in and out of facilities since the beginning of last year.

At Weskoppies Hospital, where he is at the moment, authorities said they could not keep him any longer as he posed a danger to other patients.

He was placed in a children's home earlier, following the death of

his mother. His father left and his whereabouts are unknown.

The children's home also did not want him, saying they could not cope with him as he endangered the safety of other children.

He was taken to a place of safety after a case of malicious damage to property was laid against him, after which he was then taken to Sterkfontein Hospital.

They too discharged him and sent him back to the children's home.

It was stated that his behaviour became erratic and the police subsequently removed him.

A Children's Court made an order that he be kept at another place of safety, but they refused to have him.

He had to be kept overnight in police cells. A social worker tried to secure him a place in Weskoppies, but they also refused him.

The Department of Social Development was asked about a suitable placement option, but none was forthcoming.

The social worker had no alternative but to seek an order compelling Weskoppies to take the boy in. The facility said he may only stay there until his condition had stabilised.

Weskoppies now say social workers should fetch the boy.

"The centre is concerned that there does not seem to be alternative placement options for children such as this one. This position is clearly untenable and neither in his best interests, nor those of any child who finds himself or herself in a similar situation. The lack of appropriate facilities for children suffering from chronic mental illnesses is in breach of children's rights," said Skelton.