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We acted swiftly on abuse claim, Knights say

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NEW HAVEN, Conn. -- The Knights of Columbus denied allegations made in two lawsuits filed Dec. 14 that the fraternal organization did not address claims that a former Knight abused two men decades ago when they were young and tried to conceal the allegations.

The lawsuits claim that Juan "Julian" Rivera, a former leader of the Columbian Squires in Brownsville, Texas, abused the men in the 1970s and 1980s when they were boys. The Columbian Squires is a Knights-sponsored leadership group for boys 10-18.

The suits were filed separately by two adults now in their 40s; one lives in Texas, the other in Kansas. Each suit seeks more than $5 million in damages. They were filed by a Florida lawyer in U.S. District Court in Connecticut, where the Knights has its headquarters.

One of the alleged victims claimed he reported the abuse to Knights officials in 1986, who supposedly concealed his claim and intimidated him into not making it public.

The Knights' Dec. 14 statement said the fraternal organization learned of the allegations against Rivera "only one year ago, in December 2009."

Once the organization learned of the claims, the Knights said it "acted immediately, removing him from any responsibility involving youth programs and referring the case to Brownsville law enforcement authorities."

Rivera terminated his membership in the Knights in January of this year.

"Although we have not yet been served with the lawsuits, we have obtained and reviewed copies of the complaints, and we emphatically deny the allegations that have been made," Patrick Korten, Knights of Columbus vice president for communications, said in a statement issued at the Knights' headquarters in New Haven.

The Hartford Courant daily newspaper reported that both men suing the Knights said they grew up in Catholic families in Brownsville. When they were about 10 years old, the men said, Rivera aggressively recruited them to join the Columbian Squires.

One of the men filing the lawsuit is known only as John Doe. The other, a Texas resident, is Jim Dennany.

In the lawsuits, both men made similar allegations, saying Rivera had a reputation among Catholic boys in Brownsville as being "cool" because he gave them alcohol.

They claimed Rivera gave them alcohol and showed them pornographic pictures before engaging them in sexual acts. The unidentified man claimed Rivera showed him a handgun and threatened to kill his family if he reported the abuse.

In 2003, the Knights formalized its policies involving youth activities in its Youth Protection Program. Every Knight who agrees to serve as a youth leader must undergo a background check every three years.

"The safety and well-being of the youngsters involved in our Columbian Squires program and all other youth activities of the Knights of Columbus are among our highest priorities, and are at the heart of our approach to helping young Catholics become faithful and responsible citizens and future leaders of the church," Korten said.

This summer, there were close to 28,000 Columbian Squires in about 1,500 groups called Squires Circles.

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