

DRUG-TREATMENT CENTER MAKES STRIDES, BUT PROBLEMS REMAIN

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Five months after charges that a Lake Worth drug-treatment center left a Coral Springs girl shellshocked like some combat veterans, state officials still find problems at Palm Beach County's most controversial treatment center.

Teen-agers still restrain and physically hold other teens at Growing Together Inc., a practice violating state policy, state records show. And so few qualified professionals work at the non-profit center that when the executive director is gone, no certified substance-abuse professional is available.

State officials and the center still haggle over key issues in what has become touchy negotiations.

But the center is improving, records say.

"Many of HRS' earlier concerns have been alleviated," Robert Williams, district administrator for the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, wrote in a June 20 letter to the center.

The teen center, at 1013 Lucerne Ave., is expected to announce on Thursday that it has gained full accreditation from the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations, based in Oakbrook Terrace, Ill.

An accredited center must pass a "very rigorous" review of 1,700 standards, and Growing Together became conditionally accredited on Jan. 25, said Cynthia Markins, Joint Commission spokeswoman. Centers typically are conditionally accredited before gaining full accreditation, she said.

Growing Together drew scrutiny in the spring when the mother of a 15-year-old girl named Dana wrote letters of complaint to Palm Beach Circuit Judge Michael Gersten, who signed the order committing the girl for drug treatment. Dana suffered "post-traumatic stress disorder" after spending time at Growing Together and emerged with a "totally crushed" spirit and confidence, a psychiatrist wrote.

State investigators then discovered problems at the center.

Youths more advanced in the program have authority to tackle newcomers to the floor to discipline them, they found. Teens cannot talk to their families until they earn that privilege. Clients do not have qualified counselors assigned to work one-on-one with them.

The state recently extended the center's operating license until October -- and also made it aware of unresolved problems that could be allayed with more staff members.

The center must make sure more professional staff members watch teens, a July 30 letter by HRS says. The center also must correct its practice of physically holding or restraining teens, and change a policy discouraging non-emergency medical or dental care for teens new to the program.

Growing Together officials have been adamant that their center breaks no state policy. Teens are properly supervised, get immediate medical attention when needed and never are "restrained" -- but are physically held sometimes, chairman Warren Blanchard Jr. wrote to HRS on July 12.

HRS officials declined comment for this story.

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