

PATIENTS DEFEND DRUG REHABILITATION CENTER

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Supporters of a Lake Worth drug rehabilitation center criticized for its treatment of patients Thursday struck back at what they called harassment by the media and the state.

The state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services has told Growing Together, a long-term rehabilitation clinic for adolescents, that its patients have been restrained illegally. In March, the parents of a 15-year-old girl told a judge that she was abused during 15 months of treatment.

But 40 people, including patients and their parents, attended a press conference at the clinic Thursday to support Growing Together Chairman Warren Blanchard, who said he wanted to speak publicly because he does not believe HRS will settle its complaints soon.

"They will never come out and say, 'Yes, it is fine,' because that is not in their nature," Blanchard said. "I don't think they will take that risk."

In March, Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Michael Gersten blasted the clinic after hearing about the alleged abuse of the 15-year-old.

The Growing Together program relies on strict discipline to keep teen-age addicts away from their old lives, and supporters said patients need to be physically restrained when they become violent.

In a July 30 letter, HRS District Administrator Robert Williams told Blanchard that he believes Growing Together staff have illegally tackled clients. He also said that the program does not have enough adult staff members and does not have adequate procedures to send ill patients for medical care.

The letter also noted that the center's license expires in October and the department will conduct surprise inspections before then.

Williams was on vacation and could not be reached for comment. James Howell, HRS deputy district administrator, declined to discuss the case.

Blanchard said Williams has misinterpreted the state rules about restraining patients. He said Growing Together staff do not use drugs or mechanical devices to subdue clients when they become violent, which makes the program legal under the regulations.

In March, Judge Gersten stopped sending drug cases for treatment at Growing Together, but he said Thursday he would be willing to end his boycott if HRS gives the clinic a "clean bill of health."

The clinic's executive director, Barbara Griffith, said the program employs enough adult staff members, including a registered nurse who decides when patients are sent to a doctor. Griffith said the state is complaining about "semantics," and Blanchard said HRS officials have told him privately the Legislature needs to give a more specific definition of illegal restraining.

"If HRS has some real concerns, I would hope that they will come in and shut this program down today," Blanchard said.

Peggy Kelly, who went through a similar Sarasota program as an addict and helped open the Lake Worth clinic as a counselor, said both HRS and the media have ignored the program's accomplishments to concentrate on minor points.

"It is very sad that they have taken it out on a program that doesn't need it," Kelly said. "It is my feeling that the program and the structure of the program saved my life."

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