

TOUGH PROGRAM WORKS, ADDICTS' PARENTS SAY - BUT STATE DRAWS LINE: CHANGE TACTICS OR LOSE LICENSE

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Jill [REDACTED] first few months at Growing Together Inc., the third treatment center to tackle her dependence on crack cocaine and alcohol, were rough going.

As a "newcomer" in the program, she had almost no privacy, slept in a guarded room and was allowed to talk to her parents for only briefly once a week. She was not allowed to watch television or listen to the radio.

But after 11/2 years at Growing Together, [REDACTED] 18, has only praise for the program's rigid structure and sometimes harsh methods. It took strong medicine, she said, to steer her away from drugs and alcohol.

"I went through a lot of rough times in the program, but I'm really appreciative of where I am today," she said this week. "I always knew I had friends here who cared about me. In my other programs, no one really cared."

State officials take a dimmer view of Growing Together's treatment regimen. They are especially disturbed by reports that "oldcomers"-- youths who have progressed beyond the first of the program's six phases -- have used force to keep rebellious new enrollees in line.

Officials with Florida's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services say that policy and others violate the rights of youths enrolled in the program. They have given the Growing Together staff until May 8 to change the policies, or the center will lose its license.

The state's action has angered the parents of teenagers who have successfully battled drug and alcohol problems at Growing Together.

"I know my son would not be alive today if it wasn't for that program," said Judy [REDACTED], the mother of a former crack addict who spent nine months at Growing Together. "There were a lot of things about the program that I didn't see eye-to-eye with. But if that's what it takes to get off crack, then that's what it takes."

Barbara Griffith, executive director of Growing Together, claims 80 percent of the youths who complete the program remain drug and alcohol-free for at least two years. Parents say that success rate justifies the program's controversial approach.

"I have my daughter back," said Ronnie [REDACTED], Jill's mother. "It's a beautiful thing to see a kid be able to turn around and say, 'Help me.'"

Growing Together, which treats drug and alcohol abusers aged 12 to 22, shapes behavior through peer pressure. As youths progress through the program, they help newcomers overcome their addictions.

There is intense pressure to conform. In program jargon, "misbehavers" who "throw off a bad attitude" or are dishonest in assessing their behavior receive "consequences" such as demotion to a lower phase and loss of privileges. Even listening to rock music is forbidden.

Critics call these techniques a form of brainwashing.

"Their intentions were great, but people in jail had more freedom than we had," said David [REDACTED], 21, a former client.

Some parents also object to the treatment program's strongly Christian overtones.

"We're really not for having this religion shoved down our throats," said one parent, who asked to remain anonymous. "It's a serious problem, and it's getting worse."

Others say the ends justify the means. Youths close to completing the program say they have attended other treatment programs, some costing \$1,000 a day, that did nothing for them. Growing Together charges \$7,200 for a program that can last 18 months. There is an additional charge of \$325 a month for Phase 1 clients.

"For me, this is the only program that would work," said Jennifer [REDACTED], 16, of Boynton Beach. "I don't have to use drugs to have a good time any more."

The treatment center also makes heavy demands on parents. Newcomers spend their nights at the homes of parents whose own children

are enrolled in the program. Being a "host home" parent means giving up vacations, drinking and television. But many say the sacrifices make sense.

"I realized that if I wanted my child alive, I had to make a commitment," Ronnie ██████ said.

- **Caption:** PHOTO (C)STEPHEN B. THORNTON/Staff Photographer Jill and Ronnie ██████ say Growing Together has helped Jill beat her addictions.
- **Memo:** Also ran S.

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