

TOUGH CENTER MUST PROVE IT'S FAIR

Palm Beach Post, The (FL) (Published as The Palm Beach Post) - March 25, 1990

- Author/Byline: Fran Hathaway
- Edition: FINAL
- Section: OPINION
- Page: 2E

Addiction is a tragedy for any family. Treatment is tough. The cost can be staggering.

When the addict is a boy or girl but is acting like an out-of-control adult, the trauma is magnified. The kid is the sick one. But family members may be frozen with fear at his behavior and confused about what to do -- especially when the teenager refuses help or flees.

So it's understandable that when controversy about a drug-treatment program hits the headlines-- especially a program parents have worked hard to develop and believe is effective-- there is misunderstanding and anger. That's what has happened with Growing Together, which dedicated its Lake Worth facility three years ago next month.

Growing Together is getting a hard look from officials at the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, which licenses all drug- treatment programs. Florida law is clear on matters such as the physical restraint of clients, a client's right to talk to family members and/or an attorney, training of staff, and the general protection of people's dignity, health, safety and right to privacy.

HRS' concern: Has Growing Together violated one or more of the above?

What makes the determination difficult is that substance-abuse treatment is not as clear-cut as getting clean and going home. The psychological and physical factors involved can take years to untangle. Some addicted teenagers are dangerous. They may have violent mood swings, steal to support their habit, and rain threats and obscenities on their loved ones.

Yet that's all the more reason to have strict standards for treatment centers. A troubled kid may be troubled for various reasons, including developmental problems. It can be a tough call in an emotion-charged atmosphere.

Growing Together accepts no public money and depends on families of recovering clients to host new clients. That reduces the cost compared with inpatient centers, and there's nothing we need more than treatment programs that don't break the bank. But HRS still is responsible for monitoring each home.

Last Tuesday, Growing Together's executive committee met with three public officials-- two of them top HRS officials-- at the West Palm Beach office of their attorney, Jack Scarola, to discuss how to work out their differences. Growing Together had been given until May 8 to comply with the law or lose its license.

Apparently, the meeting was fruitful. I'd like to be more specific. But Growing Together's president, Warren Blanchard, asked me to leave the meeting, citing client confidentiality. He was within his rights if specific clients were discussed. But he also wanted to guard against "airing this in the press."

According to some parents of children helped by Growing Together, recent Palm Beach Post stories were "slanted" against the program. Mr. Blanchard, whose two sons went through the program and who is not unaware of the value of good public relations, views the situation more objectively.

"We have a common objective with HRS," he says. "If our program is as solid as we think, we'll stand close scrutiny. We think something very good is going to come out of this."

I suspect he's right. But open discussion never hurts a good idea, whereas the appearance of secrecy breeds suspicion. Openness also is more likely to increase credibility and community support. Supporters may think that it's difficult to explain to people untouched by addiction how the program operates. I doubt that's true.

Explaining could even be viewed as part of their mission. Substance abuse permeates every aspect of our lives, from crime to crack-ravaged babies. We need more discussion of how to deal with it, not less.

It's America's No. 1 problem. Americans want to understand.

* Fran Hathaway is an editorial writer for The Palm Beach Post.

- *Index terms: DRUG ABUSE AGENCY; COLUMN*
- *Record: PBP03250497*
- *Copyright: Copyright 1990 Palm Beach Newspapers, Inc.*