

## DRUG CENTER ABUSED TEEN-AGER, JUDGE TOLD

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A Palm Beach County Circuit Court judge blasted a Lake Worth drug treatment center and the parents of a troubled teen- age girl Thursday after hearing allegations that the girl had been physically and psychologically abused during 15 months of drug and alcohol counseling.

"There have been enough red flags raised to cause me great concern," said Judge Michael Gersten at the court hearing. He said he would refuse to enter any future orders directing patients to Growing Together Inc. in Lake Worth "until such time as I'm convinced in my own mind that (the program) is competent."

The girl, now 15, was first admitted to the program in October 1988, when she was 13. According to a court document filed by the girl's mother, the girl had repeatedly run away from home, abused alcohol and "habitually" used drugs.

But the parents, from Coral Springs, said they pulled their daughter from the program Jan. 24 after being denied access to her for three months and witnessing other "peer counselors" at the drug center physically restrain her.

"She doesn't have the rebellious will she once had," the girl's mother told the judge. "On the other hand, she's totally withdrawn and she cowers."

"She's like a puppy who got beat with a newspaper for a day," added the father. "If we had left her there 30 more days, she would be sitting in a corner talking to herself with drool coming out of her mouth."

Rik Pavlescak, of the state's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, visited the drug center in February and told Gersten in a report that the center violated several HRS licensing regulations.

The report says that despite two HRS warnings, older teen- agers in the program who act as "peer counselors" to newcomers are involved in restraining the younger patients.

New patients are also afforded no privacy. According to the report, older patients watch newcomers when they use the bathroom and take showers. HRS district administrator Robert Williams sent a letter to the center saying its license will be revoked if it does not correct the violations immediately.

Barbara Griffith, executive director of the nearly 3-year- old program, denied the violations took place and said she would cooperate fully with HRS and the court to ensure the program complied with the law. She disputed the parents' charges that the girl was not free to leave.

"We told them on Nov. 11 that if they were unhappy with anything that was happening that they were welcome to take her at that point and they refused," Griffith said afterward.

"It's a very structured program and a lot of people cannot make the commitment to the extent that the program asks."

Judge Gersten expressed astonishment that the parents had waited so long to act, and chastised the mother for labeling her daughter in commitment papers as a heavy drug user when in fact she was not.

"Everything I see here smacks of child abuse," the judge said. "If, in effect, your daughter was not an habitual abuser of substances, if you lied on these petitions, you abused your daughter."

The parents responded that they had assumed the girl used drugs because of her erratic behavior. They said they were desperate at the time and were urged by the program's staff not to question their methods.

"We feel we were somewhat brainwashed into this thing," said the father.

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