

HRS: LAKE WORTH DRUG CLINIC `JAILS' PATIENTS

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- Author/Byline: VAL ELLICOTT, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer
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A drug-abuse treatment center in Lake Worth has turned patients into virtual prisoners by forcibly restraining them, locking them into their rooms at night and guarding them while they go to the bathroom, state officials say. Growing Together Inc. has 60 days to change its practices or officials with Florida's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services will take away the treatment center's license.

"Clients would have more rights in a detention center than they do in this program," Rik Pavlescak, the local director of substance-abuse services for HRS, said Thursday.

Pavlescak began receiving complaints in June 1989 that patients at Growing Together were using force against fellow patients who resisted complying with the treatment program's rules.

One parent, who complained about Growing Together in court Thursday, said in a letter to Circuit Judge Michael Gersten that she saw five "boys and girls" enrolled in the program tackle her daughter and hold her to the floor. Dr. Stephen Moskowitz, a psychiatrist in Coral Springs, wrote Gersten that the child, now 15, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of her 15 months at Growing Together.

"She seemed quite fearful and seemed to project an image of a child whose spirit and sense of confidence had been totally crushed," Moskowitz wrote.

Gersten said Thursday he will refuse to commit children to Growing Together until the center improves its treatment of patients.

"Everything I see smacks of child abuse," he said.

Most of the complaints HRS has received concern the treatment of patients in the first of the program's six "phases."

In the initial phases, patients spend the night at "host homes" that belong to parents whose children also are enrolled in the program.

Phase 1 patients at Growing Together have almost no privacy and no effective means of complaining to program directors about their treatment, Pavlescak said. To make sure newcomers don't leave the program, he said, other patients sleep in front of their bedroom doors at night and guard them when they go to the bathroom. Patients who try to run away are chased and held down by other patients, HRS officials reported.

Pavlescak also said Growing Together staff members have advised parents of children nearing their 18th birthdays to obtain court orders to keep the children in the program, even if the children had not used alcohol or drugs for months.

Barbara Griffith, Growing Together's executive director, said staff members are told not to recommend court orders, but only to describe them as an option. She declined to comment on the HRS allegations, but she said Growing Together provides effective treatment of alcohol and drug abuse by taking a "kids helping kids" approach and by emphasizing family involvement.

The private, non-profit program can last up to two years, with six months of follow-up treatment. Pavlescak said some patients praise the program's tough approach to drug and alcohol abuse. But he also said it is the only treatment program in a five-county area that essentially takes all rights away from new patients.

"The ends don't justify the means," he said.

HRS officials first suspended Growing Together's license in June 1989. They gave the treatment center's directors 90 days to comply with state laws regarding treatment of patients. They lifted the suspension in October after noting improvements.

But Pavlescak took another look at Growing Together this year after a parent complained to the state's Abuse Registry about the program. He said program officials were committing the same type of violations they had been cited for last year.

HRS officials again suspended the center's license for three months -- until June. But HRS District Administrator Robert Williams decided Thursday to give treatment center officials only until May 8 to bring their policies in compliance with state laws.

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