

CRITICIZED PROGRAM IN INQUIRY SHERIFF, STATE ATTORNEY REVIEW DRUG TREATMENT

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The sheriff's office and state attorney's office are investigating Palm Beach County's most controversial drug treatment program -- already the focus of several child-abuse investigations, officials said on Friday.

Officials around the state are watching what is happening at Growing Together in Lake Worth, a focus of controversy since a 15-year-old Coral Springs girl was found in March to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder because of her time spent there.

Since then, other youngsters claim they were abused.

Parents say 10 child-abuse cases are being investigated by the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, but HRS officials say they are bound by law not to tell the number.

Various officials remain silent about details in what has become a politically charged controversy.

"It has statewide implications," Robert Williams, HRS district administrator, said of the case. "In a way, I hate to be on the cutting edge of this. There are a lot of legal issues ... so, everybody who has this type of program out there is looking at us and seeing how we're going to handle this."

To Jack Scarola, a West Palm Beach attorney and Growing Together board member, there is no reason for controversy.

But the notoriety of recent months has "severely hurt" an "extremely effective program," he said.

"It's a non-profit program doing its best, ... doing so with greater effectiveness than those that cost three and four and 10 times more," Scarola said on Friday.

The program, which treats about 40 to 65 children at a time, does not intend to change a basic point of conflict: Center officials contend there is nothing wrong with teens pinning fellow, unruly teens to the ground to restrain them, HRS' Williams said.

The state contends it is against the law -- except when teens need to defend themselves or their lives are threatened, Williams said.

Such practices were revealed during a state investigation sparked by a letter of complaint by the mother of a 15-year-old from Coral Springs. The mother wrote to Circuit Judge Michael Gersten, who ordered the girl to be treated at Growing Together. He referred the matter to the state.

Gersten now refuses to order children to be treated there.

The state threatens to revoke its license unless the center demonstrates in an upcoming administrative hearing that it complies with state law.

The county sheriff's office is investigating abuse complaints, said Detective Steve Landrum. So is the state attorney's office, said Mary Green, coordinator of the Crimes Against Children unit.

Growing Together, costing about \$10,000 for two years of treatment, embraces peer pressure to get youths off drugs. Newcomers do not talk to their parents for weeks or months. No television. No music. No privileges allowed until they have earned them. They sleep at the homes, sometimes on the floor, of other teens more advanced in the program. Where they sleep can change from night to night.

It might seem harsh to outsiders, but kicking teen drug abuse requires tough measures, Scarola said.

"Fire needs to be fought with fire," Scarola said. "This isn't a picnic, but ... it's done in a loving but unquestionably firm and stern manner."

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