

DRUG CENTER REFUSES TO RELEASE 11 PATIENTS FOR ABUSE INVESTIGATION

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Investigators from the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services asked a judge Friday to allow them to remove 11 patients from a Lake Worth drug treatment center for questioning about complaints of abuse.

Investigators arrived unannounced at Growing Together Inc. on Thursday and demanded the center release 11 patients. Growing Together officials refused.

"It would be very disruptive of their treatment if they are removed," attorney Jack Scarola told Circuit Judge Howard Berman at an emergency hearing Friday. "My response was to offer HRS the opportunity to interview children on the premises."

HRS attorney Patrick Kinni said investigators want to question the patients at HRS offices instead of the treatment center so the teens would not feel intimidated.

"We feel the children might be under stress or pressure not to talk to HRS," Kinni said.

Kinni refused to detail the allegations, citing confidentiality laws, but said HRS wants to investigate the actions of certain employees.

HRS investigator Maureen E. Ferguson said investigators decided to question the teens after interviewing seven patients who filed abuse allegations with the Child Abuse Registry in Tallahassee.

The youths' fears, she said, are real.

"When I interviewed one child on the premises he kept saying, 'Is this room bugged? Are there wires?'" Ferguson said.

Growing Together treats drug and alcohol abusers aged 12-22 and shapes behavior through peer pressure. HRS officials are 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.

Patients sleep in guarded rooms and are not allowed to watch television or listen to the radio. During the first phase of the program-- which can take months-- patients are not allowed to speak to their parents, HRS officials said.

HRS officials suspended Growing Together's license in June and 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.

In March, HRS officials gave the Growing Together staff until May 8 to change its policies or lose its license. "Everything I see smacks of child abuse," Gersten said.

Scarola, a member of Growing Together's board of directors, asked that the interviews be taped and that parents be given the opportunity to attend. He assured HRS officials that the interviews would be held in private rooms and the patients would not be questioned afterward.

Berman ordered the interviews to be held at the center and to be taped. Parents must be notified, but Berman declined to rule on whether parents should be allowed to attend.

"There's no question it's a harsh program," Scarola said after the hearing. "The parents have turned them over to us -- it's the same as parents' right to lock children in their rooms."

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