

JUDGE: HRS CAN ASK ADDICTS ABOUT ABUSE WITH PARENTS ABSENT

Palm Beach Post, The (FL) (Published as The Palm Beach Post) - May 9, 1990

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- Edition: FINAL
- Section: LOCAL
- Page: 1B

State officials investigating reports of abuse in a controversial drug and alcohol treatment program may interview children enrolled in the program without their parents present, a judge ruled Monday.

"The children are witnesses, not suspects," Circuit Judge Howard Berman said in ruling that officials with the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services could interview the children privately.

James Herb, an attorney representing the children's parents, had asked Berman to allow parents or their attorneys to attend the interviews. He appealed Berman's ruling to the 4th District Court of Appeal on Monday, but he was pessimistic about the outcome.

The 11 youths are enrolled at Growing Together Inc. in Lake Worth, a treatment program that uses strong peer pressure and harsh discipline to help youths kick drugs and alcohol. State officials are investigating complaints that employees at the center have emotionally abused or neglected youths.

Berman ruled Friday that the state agency must hold the interviews at the treatment center and that the interviews must be taped.

Barbara Griffith, Growing Together's executive director, tried to change Berman's mind about allowing the interviews. She argued that young drug and alcohol abusers at Growing Together often chafe at the program's methods and would lie to win release.

"Honesty is not their most famous trait," Griffith said of the youths. "They would grab at anyone who offers them a thread of hope that they might not have to stay in treatment . . . They basically don't want to be there."

HRS attorney Patrick Kinni countered that agency investigators are trained to distinguish truth from lies in conducting interviews.

Growing Together treats drug and alcohol abusers aged 12 to 22. HRS officials are disturbed by reports that "oldcomers"-- who have progressed beyond the program's first phase-- 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.

In March, HRS officials suspended Growing Together's permanent license. They issued the program a temporary license and gave the program until Tuesday to change its policies or lose its license. The deadline was lifted after Growing Together officials asked for an administrative hearing.

- *Index terms: DRUG ISSUE JUDGE COURT DECISION PARENT ABUSE PBC*
- *Dateline: WEST PALM BEACH*
- *Record: PBP05090852*
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