

## PARENTS, TEENS GROW TOGETHER AFTER REHAB PROGRAM FOLDS

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Dozens of parents were stunned Saturday to hear that Growing Together Inc., a well-known drug treatment program for teens, was out of money and would close down within hours.

Parents said they were told at the Saturday morning meeting that they had until 1 p.m. that day to pick up their children and leave. Unable to accept the sudden end of a program they said was the last hope for many families, the parents took over.

A local banker whose daughter is in the program agreed to run it. Another parent who works as an accountant scoured records to find out how much money the organization will need to stay alive. A real estate broker whose son is in the program paid the teens' meal expense out of his own pocket, and several others offered to put up thousands in donations to pay the operating expenses.

"We take a kid with no hope, who pretty much hates life, and completely turn them around," one parent said.

So far, the parents have managed to keep the Growing Together building near Blue Heron Boulevard open. The parents tracked down employees, a few of whom left when told the program was closing, and scrambled to meet the oversight requirements of the Department of Children and Families, which licenses the program. About 50 parents gathered for an emergency meeting Tuesday night.

The program's former director, Patricia Allard, resigned, parents said. She could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Growing Together opened as a not-for-profit corporation two decades ago. About 20 teens attend school and counseling during the day, but go home at night with parents of other teens in the program who act as host families. The facility is ringed by a fence, and is one of the few drug treatment programs where teens are not allowed to sign themselves out.

Parents pay a fee of more than \$20,000 up front for treatment that typically lasts about 18 months. But those costs only cover about half of the \$1.2 million annual budget, board members say, and the rest has to be made up through private donations.

Jack Scarola, a board member and prominent Palm Beach County attorney, said the organization struggled financially in recent years. The agency squeaked by with money from a loyal group of donors, Scarola said, and once relied on reimbursements from private insurance companies to help with teens' treatment costs.

But nearly all health insurance companies have stopped paying for the treatment, Scarola said, putting more pressure on board members to raise money. The hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 hurt earnings from a dinner-dance auction and golf tournament.

As a last resort, the organization sold its building in Lake Worth and moved to a facility in Riviera Beach. Growing Together used the equity from that sale as long as it could to pay operating expenses, Scarola said.

Some parents said they heard in May that the program was having trouble with money, and were recently asked to start paying for their children's meals. But others said they were completely blindsided by Saturday's announcement, and worried that if the program folded, their fees would not be reimbursed.

"One way or other, we have always managed to avoid the impending crisis," Scarola said. "There were reasons for us to believe we were going to do that again."

The program has drawn criticism over the years, in part for alleged incidents where older teens hazed new recruits. The controversy was especially strong in the early 1990s, when a national debate raged over abuses at similar programs for teens.

"Those allegations have arisen from time to time, most often in the early history of the program," Scarola said. "Every time, they have been thoroughly investigated and the program has been vindicated."

Many parents of children in the program say it works to reconnect families and break teens' addictions.

One businessman said his son is doing well in the program. He isn't ready to leave Growing Together.

"I think everything is going to work out. They've been in this slump before and they've pulled through," he said.

Staff researcher Bridget Bulger contributed to this story.

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