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HEADLINE: KIDS: IS IT TREATMENT OR TORMENT?

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BODY:

The Bergen County prosecutor is looking into allegations of physical abuse and unlawful restraint of teen-agers at KIDS of Bergen County, a substance-abuse program in River Edge.

Several teen-agers no longer in the program have told Prosecutor Larry J. McClure they were repeatedly abused during rehabilitation. Some said they were struck by other teen-agers and by peer counselors.

Others said they were isolated in small windowless rooms for hours or days at a time, or pinned to the floor beneath other teen-agers.

Several said they were coerced into remaining in the program.

Some teen-agers who left the program as recently as two months ago said they suffered bruises, fractured noses, and back and neck injuries while in the private, nonprofit program.

The facility serves teen-agers from Bergen, Passaic, Hudson, Essex, and Rockland counties, as well as New York City.

"We are aware there have been some complaints with respect to KIDS of Bergen County, and we are inquiring into it," McClure said.

His office has interviewed an undisclosed number of former clients and their parents, and is looking into allegations of physical abuse, unlawful restraint, and violation of rights, McClure said.

He declined to elaborate on specific complaints, saying only, "We're trying to gather information at the moment."

Miller Newton, the founder and director of KIDS, formerly directed Straight, a drug-treatment program in Florida that was also the target of severe criticism and a several lawsuits charging similar abuses.

They were settled out of court, said Newton, who is a former Methodist minister and holds a doctorate in anthropology.

He said his adolescent charges at KIDS are not abused, and he questioned the honesty of the teen-agers and parents making the allegations.

"I would like to see the program closed down," said Mary [REDACTED] of Bayonne. Mrs. [REDACTED] removed her 16-year-old son Danny from KIDS when he failed to make progress after one year and said he had been physically abused.

Danny said he was put into a "chicken wing" position once for slouching in his chair: His arms were held straight out by other teen-agers, who pulled his wrists and elbows in opposite directions.

Like other clients, Danny also said he was sometimes pinned to the floor by peer counselors and other clients for "cliqueing", talking or signaling to others during a group session.

Todd [REDACTED] of Teaneck ran away from KIDS in January after two years and four unsuccessful attempts at escape. He said he told the prosecutor's office that during treatment at KIDS, he was confined to a 10-by-12-foot room on three occasions for "acting out."

The first time, Todd said, he was isolated in the room for 12 consecutive days and let out at night by two teen-agers guarding the door. The second time, he said, he was confined to the room for 30 days; the third confinement lasted 58 days. Each time, he spent at least 14 hours a day in the room, he said.

"All I could feel was rage," Todd said of the isolation, which drove him to write all over the walls and fight "for fun" with the other adolescents who watched him. That period, he said, was "pure hell."

Newton said the charges were groundless.

"The complaints may be endemic to this kind of program and this type of troubled population," said Newton. "Most of the kids here have a pathology of lying and blaming."

KIDS is a tough, authoritative program that relies heavily on peer pressure to help teen-agers overcome addictive behavior. Its name apparently is not an acronym.

Most clients are signed into the program by their parents and, Newton noted, very few like it until they make progress.

Yet since its inception in 1984, the privately funded program has grown rapidly and now treats 135 youths, aged 12 to 21, for drug abuse as well as eating disorders and other compulsive behavior.

While some parents laud KIDS, saying it saved their children from a life of drug abuse, others believe the treatment is unusually harsh,

sometimes becoming mistreatment.

A Hawthorne youth, whose parents signed him into the program three weeks before his 18th birthday, said he tried at least eight times to leave KIDS after turning 18, but was held against his will. His twin brother also was in the program.

The young man, who asked not to be identified, was expelled from the program in February when his twin ran away from the KIDS program in the middle of the night, clad only in blankets.

Yet some teen-agers, while denouncing the boot-camp atmosphere of the program, praised KIDS for helping them regain sobriety and freedom from drug abuse. As one Closter youth described the program: "Its intentions are good, but there's a lot of bugs that have to be worked out."

KIDS is not licensed as a drug- and alcohol-treatment center; it is not required to be licensed since it does not provide medical care or medication, only counseling.

The program's five professional staff members are either certified as substance-abuse counselors through a voluntary peer-certification process, or hold master's degrees in counseling.

Although Newton stressed that KIDS is substantially superior to the Florida-based Straight treatment program in its professionalism, complaints against both programs center on excessive use of force against teen-agers.

During Newton's tenure as clinical director of Straight in St. Petersburg, officials investigated the program on complaints that included unlawful restraint and physical intimidation, such as pushing and striking clients.

Although criminal charges were never filed against Newton, Florida officials said he was responsible for policies that violated state law, particularly holding clients against their will for weeks.

Newton became director of the flagship St. Petersburg program in 1981 and took the position of national clinical director of Straight, with branches in four states, the following year. Amid state probes, he resigned in November 1983 after Straight refused to hire more professionally trained staff.

Newton bristles at being identified closely with Straight because, he said, the program was plagued with problems before and after his stewardship.

But some former clients at KIDS, and their parents, said they believe KIDS sanctions an atmosphere of violence, an accusation Newton flatly denied. Many of their complaints stem from the treatment program's reliance on peer counselors, "druggie" teen-agers, who are deemed rehabilitated enough to supervise their peers.

The peer counselors run marathon group-counseling sessions that last 12 hours a day, six days a week, as well as seven hours on Sunday.

The sessions are patterned after the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, which require addicts to admit their powerlessness over their lives and ultimately accept a "higher power."

During the sessions, held in large, windowless rooms containing only plastic chairs and a table, teen-agers stand surrounded by their peers and talk about their substance abuse and misdeeds.

Despite the often painful self-exposure in the sessions, the meetings are highly regimented by peer counselors and other teens. The youths are not permitted to speak out of line or slouch in their chairs and are subject to the reproach or approval of their peers.

But some participants in the program said the authority of peer counselors sometimes crosses the line to intimidation, a situation that can be compounded when other teen-agers join in.

The mother of the twins said, "If you have druggie kids holding down druggie kids, they can lose control of themselves and hurt somebody real bad."

Newton maintained that KIDS peer counselors are typically more highly skilled in counseling than psychologists with master's degrees.

He refused to accept responsibility for the violent tendencies many of the adolescents in the program may feel. "If the kid is the same in the program as he was before, all of a sudden it's our fault. I don't think so," he said.

While other drug programs are failing miserably at treating adolescents, Newton said, KIDS claims a five-year success rate of 80 percent. About 20 percent drop out of the program, and 15 individuals have been graduated from KIDS since it started.

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