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HEADLINE: LICENSES OPTIONAL FOR DRUG ADVISERS

BYLINE: Laura Gardner, Staff Writer

BODY:

Despite growing support for state regulation of all substance-abuse treatment programs, entrepreneurs in the business of counseling drug abusers can hang out their shingles without government approval.

The result, state Health Department officials and drug counselors say, is that consumers remain vulnerable to unprofessional treatment.

Currently, programs that provide outpatient counseling for drug abusers, but no medical treatment, are not required to be licensed by the state.

But some officials have pointed to KIDS of Bergen County, which is now the object of an official inquiry, as an example of a treatment program that should seek voluntary licensure through the state Health Department.

Bergen County Prosecutor Larry J. McClure is looking into allegations of physical abuse and unlawful restraint of adolescent clients at KIDS of Bergen County, an intensive counseling program in Hackensack.

Matt Martin, chief of drug treatment in the state Health Department's division of narcotic and drug abuse control, described

voluntary licensure as a worthwhile option for programs such as KIDS.

"It would protect the public and let them know the place has standards.

"Consumers should be protected," Martin said. "You have to have someone saying, Yes, this is a safe program." However, officials noted that there is no movement in either the state Health Department or the legislature toward making licensure of counseling programs compulsory.

The only treatment programs that now fall under state licensing requirements are those that receive public funding, provide medical care, or are residential. The licensing compels them to adhere to minimum standards set by the state for patient care and housing.

The official stamp of approval also makes it easier for treatment programs to establish third-party insurance coverage because insurance companies are reluctant to deal with unlicensed programs, officials said.

Private programs such as KIDS, the Furman Clinic in Ridgewood, and Adolescent Alcohol and Drug Treatment (AADT), which is based in Summit and Paramus, offer intensive counseling only, and thus are not required to have a license, health officials said.

But drug counselors and state health officials say they support voluntary licensing as a way to broaden the credibility of programs. In order to obtain state licensing, programs must comply with certain building code regulations, open their books to officials, and show how they treat clients. They also must agree to four unannounced inspections yearly.

Programs that are not licensed leave parents in the dark, said Shelly Wimpfheimer, director of youth services in Bergen County.

"Many parents are desperate when they place their children in a rehab program because things have gone very wrong," she said.

"If a parent wants to make a responsible decision about placing their child," she said, "they don't have any way of knowing" whether an

unlicensed program is satisfactory.

Licensure gives state health officials the power to fine a program, demand corrective action, or even close down a center whose standards are unacceptable. Without licensing, officials can take action against a program only with a court order, Martin said.

"For the consumer, licensing ensures that there are checks and balances," said Phil Henricks, director of the Furman Clinic in Ridgewood, a private counseling program for teen-age substance abusers.

Henricks said he wants to pursue voluntary licensing, but added he has had difficulty in obtaining a certificate of need, the first step in licensing.

Dave Kerr, who founded and runs Integrity House, a licensed drug rehabilitation program in Newark, echoed Henricks in calling for licensing. But, Kerr cautioned, "having a license is no assurance that you've got an ethical program." A license, he said, "will add a little bit of credibility to the program."

Most states require some form of licensing, and in New Jersey, 78 programs fall under licensure requirements, said Dr. Solomon Goldberg, director of licensing certification and standards in the state Health Department.

Officials said they believe the number of unlicensed centers to be very low.

Although Alcohol Adolescent Drug Treatment is not licensed, the program's treatment centers in Paramus and Summit are affiliated with West Essex Hospital in Livingston, bringing the program under the hospital's accreditation, said Paula Bills, director of program development.

Martin said KIDS has ended up "somewhat in the crack" because, unlike other outpatient programs, it controls where and with whom clients live during part of treatment.

KIDS takes clients out of their own homes and places them in host homes during the first phase of treatment. Some parental complaints about KIDS have centered on the host homes, which parents said are kept secret.

Miller Newton, who founded and operates the two-year-old KIDS program, declined requests for an interview. But he indicated through a secretary that he has begun to review state licensure requirements. KIDS treats anorexic and bulimic as well drug dependent teen-agers.

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