

BEYOND THE KIDS CASE

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KIDS, the controversial private substance-abuse treatment program in Bergen County, has stirred up a storm of confusion. On the one hand, the county prosecutor is investigating allegations of abuse, illegal restraint, and violation of patient rights at the center, all attested to by parents and former patients. (Let's call them patients, not clients; these children are sick.) On the other hand is the testimony of parents who say their lives and the lives of their children had descended into hell until they came to KIDS for treatment.

It's difficult to get at the truth. Can you believe the testimony of a youngster who's lied and stolen from parents and friends to satisfy a drug habit? At the same time, do you disregard the detailed accounts of youths who say they were beaten and locked up by the teen-age counselors at KIDS?

The answers will have to come from the prosecutor's office. State laws define abuse and neglect of children, and provide for the punishment of those convicted of these offenses. But the crux of the problem with KIDS and any other substance-abuse program in this state is that anyone with a room, a desk, and a painted sign can call himself a drug counselor. Treatment can range from careful analysis to sheer charlatanry, and parents who in desperation bring their children to such centers have no way of knowing which is which.

The only treatment programs that have to be licensed in this state, as Record reporter Laura Gardner pointed out in her articles about KIDS, are those that receive public funding, provide medical care, or house their patients. State officials say that KIDS, which doesn't fall into any of these categories, has applied for licensing voluntarily. That's good; to be licensed, KIDS will have to comply with specified building-code regulations, open its books to state Health Department officials, and reveal how patients are treated. The program will also be subject to unannounced, periodic inspections.

Most substance-abuse programs in New Jersey, says the Health Department, are either licensed or moving toward it. Why aren't they all licensed? That's a gap in the present law that the legislature should close. Drug addicts and alcoholics are sick. Their care belongs in the hands of qualified practitioners, regulated by the state.

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