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**BODY:**

If your child were hooked on crack or perpetually stoned on marijuana, you might do anything to get help. You might even put him or her in an unlicensed, unregulated drug-treatment program where "excessive force" may be used against "rebellious" youngsters. A place like KIDS of Bergen County, a private program that specializes in straightening out teen-agers with substance-abuse and behavioral problems.

Bergen County Prosecutor Larry McClure recently concluded a nine-month investigation of KIDS and its director, **Miller Newton**. He said he found evidence that excessive force might have been used against some clients, but not enough evidence to substantiate criminal charges of abuse. Some teen-agers in the program said they were beaten, pinned down beneath counselors and fellow clients, and isolated in small rooms for days or weeks at a time.

Allegations like these are not new to **Miller Newton**, who ran a similar program called Straight in Florida, which also became the subject of investigations by local prosecutors and child-welfare agencies. No charges were filed, but he and his program subordinates were warned repeatedly by Florida officials to stop holding youngsters against their will and to monitor their "peer counselors" more closely to prevent violence against the clients.

New Jersey doesn't bother to license programs like KIDS because they are considered "nonresidential" (as opposed to treatment in a hospital) and because they don't dispense medication. In the KIDS program, however, youngsters are immediately taken away from their own families and placed in the homes of other clients who are further along in the program. These are called "host homes," but to all intents and purposes they are foster homes. Unlicensed, unregulated foster homes.

Programs like this are mushrooming across the state. It's an unconscionable failure on the state government's part that they are able to operate without any kind of regulation to protect the young clients undergoing treatment. Indeed, Mr. Newton says he has tried unsuccessfully to obtain a license for KIDS.

No one can regulate compassion into a program that at times chooses to cross the boundaries of common decency. But licensing and regular inspections would provide a needed measure of scrutiny. We shouldn't wait until a youngster is seriously hurt before we act to license adolescent drug treatment programs.

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