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HEADLINE: PROBE OF KIDS PROMPTS CALL FOR STATE
REGULATION

BYLINE: Laura Gardner, Staff Writer

BODY:

Bergen County Prosecutor Larry J. McClure yesterday closed a nine-month investigation of KIDS of Bergen County by calling for state regulation of all such unlicensed drug-treatment programs.

McClure said his probe of the teen-age drug program did not substantiate clients' allegations of physical mistreatment.

He added, however, that his investigation uncovered "a very glaring issue."

"The real question here is regulation and licensing of nonresidential programs," he said. "KIDS must be licensed."

Licensed programs must meet standards for patient treatment and are subject to state monitoring. But KIDS falls outside the categories of health care centers licensed and regulated by the state Department of Health because it does not dispense medication and is nonresidential.

KIDS of Bergen County, a private, Hackensack-based program for teen-agers with substance-abuse and behavioral problems, came under investigation early last summer when former clients alleged they were abused while taking part in the recovery program.

Controversial since its start in 1984, KIDS relies primarily on intensive peer counseling by former addicts and on thorough supervision of the teen-agers' lives to wean them off drugs and alcohol.

The program lasts from six months to two years, and clients spend a good deal of that time away from family and school. They are sent to "host homes" at night, and their parents aren't told where they are.

During part of the program, parents are allowed to see their children only during carefully monitored, weekly group sessions in which communication may be forbidden.

Most clients and parents who criticized the program faulted it for what they said was a rigidity that bordered on imprisonment and a lack of compassion toward the troubled youths.

Some teen-agers said they were beaten, pinned down beneath counselors and fellow clients, and isolated in small rooms for days or weeks at a time. Some distraught participants said they ran away to escape the program, only to be returned by their families or KIDS staffers.

But "the allegations of criminal wrongdoing levied against the program or its director could not be substantiated," McClure said.

The investigation did not find that any abuses in the program were systemic or condoned by its director, **Miller Newton**, and McClure said he would not recommend that a grand jury continue the probe.

However, McClure found that there may have been instances of excessive force against teen-agers. Some evidence suggested that peer counselors used more force than necessary in restraining unruly clients.

But in those cases, he said, the teen-agers triggered it by their own "rebelliousness."

McClure said he would recommend that the state attorney-general take action to license KIDS and programs like it. He said he believed it is the intent of existing state laws to require licensing of programs such as KIDS, even though the state Health Department has so far declined to do so.

In an interview yesterday, Newton, 45, clinical director and founder of KIDS, agreed that all drug-treatment programs should be licensed. He said his attempts to get a license for KIDS were unsuccessful.

McClure said one difficulty of the investigation was that it probed licensure issues, such as patient rights and treatment methods. "Had there been a proper regulatory approach to the allegations, this could all have been dealt with," said McClure.

In defense of KIDS, Newton said: "We are constantly monitoring what our peer counselors do, and there have been times that peer counselors have been sanctioned. It's a human system, and human beings are going to make mistakes, but I don't believe real abuses occur."

GRAPHIC: Photo - **Miller Newton**, Founder of KIDS

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