

SPECIALIZED DRUG TREATMENT CARRIES HIGH PRICE

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Instant treatment for drug addiction can be found if you can afford it.

One area mother decided to bypass Stewart-Marchman Treatment Center and other local facilities and take her teen-age son to Orlando. She'd heard about a unique, intensive, long-term program that claimed a high success rate. She drove him to the private treatment center and he was admitted the same day.

Nancy (not her real name) says she'd do anything, pay any price to save her child from a life-destroying addiction. She was a single mother with four children at the time, struggling to keep afloat.

Her son was just 13 when the sudden death of a close relative sent the formerly normal, outgoing child into a destructive tailspin.

She says he was already using drugs ranging from marijuana, to LSD, to over-the-counter drugs, to cocaine when he tried to commit suicide at 15. He was treated at Halifax Behavioral Services for "unresolved grief and low self-esteem." But, she contends, they didn't address his drug addiction because drug treatment wasn't covered by their insurance. (Halifax officials say that is not their policy and could not have happened. Hospital records are unavailable, protected by patient confidentiality laws. Nancy declined to allow access to them.)

Even while the son was in therapy, he continued to plunge further into addiction. At one point, Nancy taped his telephone calls and discovered he'd started to sell drugs to pay for his habit.

Finally, the day he was expelled from high school, she put him in the car and drove 90 minutes to Orlando, to the program known as Project SAFE.

A demanding five-phase program, SAFE not only treats the adolescent addict, but provides emotional support and counseling for every member of the family.

SAFE Director Loretta Parrish claims the program is one of just three similar programs in the country. It is based on intensive education and counseling paired with a nurturing family environment. The rules for everyone involved are stringent; Parrish describes it as "an almost military regime."

She explains that one of the main problems with substance abuse in adolescents is that it freezes their maturation process at the emotional age they were when they started using. The SAFE program emphasizes teaching them mature coping skills.

In the first phase, the teen addicts deal with their personal problems in a neutral environment in the home of another teen client's family away from their own family's built-in stresses and triggers for use.

In the second phase, they return to their family in the company of fellow recovering teen addicts who use peer pressure to defuse the situation when old patterns of manipulation and dependency surface.

Families with a child at SAFE must agree to host small groups of teens from the program, either all five weeknights or for a weekend.

In the later phases, the teens learn to deal with the normal stresses of life at school and work, extracurricular activities and sports all while in the company of counseling and supportive peers.

It's an unusually in-depth treatment, with a minimum stay of 241 days. The success rate of graduates has not been tracked, but Parrish estimates about 70 percent of the kids go on to lead productive lives and avoid drugs and alcohol. The program is accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations.

But it's not cheap. Unlike such programs as Stewart-Marchman and most other local programs, there is no sliding scale, no financial discount for needy clients.

Everyone is supposed to pay the same amount, which starts out at a daunting \$1,900 for the first month and drops to a relatively manageable \$600 a month for a maximum of 30 months. Parrish says grants are available.

Nancy found it overwhelming at first. "I had to refinance my house," just to start with, she says. She was willing to do whatever it took to

pay for the program. While her son didn't complete all five phases of the program, she says he benefited enormously and is now clean and attending community college in Gainesville.

"After all, we save to pay for our kids' education, we'd do anything to get them medical treatment if they are sick.

"It's better than paying for a funeral."

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