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Drug Centers, Parents Vie Over Who Knows Best

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Paulette Curry was barely awake when she picked up the telephone at 7:30 a.m. and heard her son gasping on the other end of the line.

Andre Curry, 16, told his mother he was having an asthma attack and that the counselors at the Primavera Treatment Center, a private **drug** rehabilitation center in Culpeper, were not taking it seriously.

The story of what happened to the 16-year-old after he telephoned his mother July 28 illustrates the rarely publicized but increasingly common tug-of-war that occurs between parents of juvenile **drug** users and **drug** abuse counselors, experts in the field say.

At the heart of the conflict is the question of who knows what's best for the child. Parents contend they do; the courts believe licensed professionals do.

In Curry's case, even when she believed her son's life was in danger, she could not help him because the court had ordered her son into treatment, thus stripping her of control over his care.

Primavera officials declined to discuss Andre Curry's stay, even after his mother waived confidentiality rights and authorized them in a notarized letter to release information about her son to The **Washington Post**.

Embarrassment over the **drug** problem and confidentiality about juvenile matters has kept parents and counselors from discussing what all agree are frequent confrontations.

In 1987, more than 8,000 juveniles were in publicly funded treatment centers in Virginia and more in private ones. An increasing number of these children -- some as young as 9 -- are ordered by the courts into the centers, and once they are, parents lose authority over their care.

"Why feel embarrassed?" Paulette Curry said. "Every teen-ager you run into these days has done **drugs**. I want to tell parents that if your child is in some type of **drug** center and he calls up and says so-and-so did this, or so-and-so threatened me, or so-and-so won't give me help, for your sake, check it out."

Several **drug** treatment officials said juvenile **drug** abusers are often highly manipulative and sometimes feign illnesses in the hopes of getting released. Further, they said, the most effective rehabilitation programs are the toughest, no-nonsense ones.

According to the Currys, ambulance drivers, Andre Curry's doctor and a court official, the following happened on July 28:

After her son called and told her of his asthma attack, Paulette Curry called the Culpeper sheriff's office and asked a dispatcher to send an ambulance to Primavera, which the dispatcher did. The rescue workers arrived around 8:30 a.m., but never saw Andre Curry.

"A couple nurses came out and said, 'Thank you anyway, but everyone is okay,' " Culpeper rescue worker Timothy Sjurseth said.

Around 11 a.m., Primavera officials "terminated" Andre Curry from their program because, according to sources, they felt he and his mother were uncooperative and troublesome throughout the youth's one-month stay. Shortly before Primavera officials released him to a Fairfax County probation officer, Andre Curry said they gave him his regular asthma medication treatment.

The probation officer, Jamie McCarron, then drove Andre Curry to a hastily scheduled court hearing in Fairfax County during which a judge was to decide where the youth should be placed next. Andre Curry was in the court's custody and originally had been ordered to Primavera because he had failed a urine **drug** test while on probation for theft, his mother said.

However, before the 1:30 p.m. hearing, Andre Curry again had difficulty breathing and was given the asthma medicine he routinely took. When that didn't alleviate his difficulties, court officials called an ambulance.

In the emergency room at Fairfax Hospital, seven hours after he first complained of an acute attack, the youth received "vigorous treatment" for "a moderately severe asthma attack," said Dr. Stephen Keller, director of Fairfax Hospital's pediatrics intensive care unit.

Keller, who had treated Andre Curry in the past for chronic asthma, said it was impossible to know when the youth's attack started because asthma problems can arise quickly. Andre Curry was kept in the hospital two days and released to his mother.

Paulette Curry said she is convinced that if her son remained at Primavera "she would have been minus one child," a strong argument, she says, for parents having more control over their children in treatment.

Vince M. Picciano, director of court services for the Fairfax County Juvenile & Domestic Relations Court, and others familiar with local rehabilitation centers, said Primavera has a good reputation; no lawsuits are on file at the Culpeper Circuit Court against Primavera.

Parents raise similar allegations to Paulette Curry's in lawsuits filed in Fairfax County Circuit Court against another **drug** program. A father, in a 1986 suit against **Straight** Inc. of Springfield, alleges that "physical and mental harm will be suffered by his son unless he is immediately released." Another suit filed in 1984 charges **Straight** with physical abuse and medical negligence. **Straight** officials said they could not discuss pending lawsuits.

Alexandria lawyer Philip J. Hirschkop said several parents have approached him with the intent to sue **drug** treatment centers over what they consider mistreatment. But Hirschkop said most decline after realizing the attention legal action might bring to their child's **drug** problem. Their main arguments are mistreatment in overburdened and loosely monitored **drug** treatment centers, Hirschkop said.

During the past several years, Barry P. Craig, director of licensure with the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse, has investigated "one or two dozen" complaints against private and public **drug** rehabilitation centers. Craig said the number of licensed centers his staff monitors has risen to 167, a 50 percent increase in five years.

Supporters of **drug** centers said that parents, while meaning to help, often interfere in an area they know nothing about. The centers, they argue, are doing a difficult job well.

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Picciano, who oversees Fairfax juvenile offenders, said that children ordered into residential treatment facilities often have criminal records along with a serious **drug** problems, are "out of control" and need strict supervision.

Bufus Gammons, assistant administrator for clinic services at **Straight** Inc., said chemical dependency is a family disease, therefore "when you talk about giving parents control over the problem, in a sense you're talking about self-medication." This, Gammons said, "is frightening."

Joseph Wright, executive director of the Washington Area Council on Alcoholism and **Drug** Abuse, said the 150 public and private rehabilitation centers in this region spent a significant amount of time grappling with parents over the care of their children. Many times, Wright said, parents deny there is a **drug** problem or argue that their child's addiction isn't "like the other kids'."

Overall, Wright believes the number of serious complaints has decreased: "Ten years ago, you'd hear a lot of blatant things. Now, you don't hear things like people locked in rooms or told to scrub a floor with a toothbrush."

Joyce Tobias knows both sides of the debate. Her son went through the **Straight** program and she now edits the newsletter for the Fairfax County Parents' Association to Neutralize **Drug** and Alcohol Abuse.

"I felt really angry at some things," she said about her son's early days at **Straight**. "I wished I had spoken up. Sometimes I think they should listen to parents more."

Though Tobias could argue with **Straight's** and other programs' methods, she said she could not argue with their results. Her son graduated magna cum laude from Virginia Tech this year.

"There is no one best way to deal with kids," Tobias said. "The whole field of **drug** rehabilitation is new. This is a legitimate discussion . . . I don't think programs always guess right, but I do believe they are trying very hard."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, PAULETTE CURRY SAID THAT IF HER SON ANDRE HAD REMAINED AT THE PRIMAVERA CENTER SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN "MINUS ONE CHILD.", LUCIAN PERKINS

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