

Judge David L.

BAZELON CENTER
for Mental Health Law

NEWS

Unregulated Residential Treatment Facilities Exploit Children and Families, Say Mental Health Experts and Advocates

Urge GAO Inquiry and Passage of Legislation

Washington, DC, October 18, 2005—Leading mental health experts and advocates today urged Congress to provide critical oversight of so-called therapeutic boarding schools and residential treatment centers in the United States and abroad that prey on unwitting families whose children have serious mental health needs.

“These facilities operate free of any oversight or regulation and with methods that have no grounding in research or conventional practice,” according to Dr. Charles Huffine, a leading expert in child and adolescent psychiatry, speaking at a Capitol Hill briefing sponsored by the Alliance for the Safe, Therapeutic and Appropriate Use of Residential Treatment (A START). “Young people tell me of being forced to lie still at a table with their heads down for hours at a time, or worse, being made to lay face down on the floor for hours and subjected to harsh physical punishment if they seek relief.”

A START, a multi-disciplinary taskforce coordinated by the Florida Mental Health Institute and the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, has studied the increased marketing of unlicensed and unregulated residential programs to desperate families as the best treatment for their children’s mental health needs. Today the group delivered a letter from leading mental health professionals to Reps. Pete Stark and George Miller (D-CA), calling for an investigation of these facilities by the Government Accountability Office (GAO). The letter also expresses support for Rep. Miller’s “End Institutionalized Abuse Against Children Act of 2005” (H.R. 1738) and the bipartisan “Keeping Families Together Act” (introduced in the House by Rep. Stark).

Among speakers at the briefing was Christine Gomez, who had unknowingly placed her son in unregulated facilities in Montana and Jamaica, where he was kept from communicating with his family for over a year and from which he emerged physically and mentally traumatized. Gomez describes “the guilt I felt over having been so naïve and trusting.” She now reaches out to other families, including “some who liquidated their assets and sold their homes to get help for their children” only to find that help was not on the program at the facilities where their children went.

In addition to professionals and advocates, speakers at the briefing included a former staff member of an unlicensed treatment center and a young woman who had been placed in such a facility. All of the speakers’ remarks are online at <http://cfs.fmhi.usf.edu/projects/AStartDocs/pressbrief.pdf>. To reach former program participants and families who are willing to share their stories with the media is available, contact the Bazelon Center or the Florida Mental Health Institute (see above).

“To induce families to send their children to these programs, parents have been told that they must make immediate placements before it is ‘too late,’” said Dr. Robert Friedman, chair of the Department of Child and Family Studies of the University of South Florida. “Tragically, it is now ‘too late’ for many young people who have died in these programs or suffered great harm. Congress must act quickly to protect other children whose families are being told the same lies.”

While most experts agree that even children with serious emotional and behavioral problems can and should be served in their homes and communities, the speakers agreed that there is a place for residential care. “Residential treatment facilities should be reserved for children and youth whose dangerous behavior cannot be controlled except in a secure setting,” concluded Tammy Seltzer, senior staff attorney at the Bazelon Center. “They should not be opportunities for unscrupulous and unaccountable entrepreneurs to get rich quick at the expense of children and families who need responsible and effective mental health treatment. We ask Congress to protect children and families by improving access to appropriate mental health treatment and increasing oversight of those who only pretend to have children’s best interests at heart.”