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## Troubling legacy

**Anchor Character Training Center, a children's center, is unlicensed in Iowa**

February 27, 2009 - By ABIGAIL McWILLIAM, Messenger news editor

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Messenger News Editor Abigail McWilliam began this package of stories when Michele Ulriksen contacted her to say Michael Palmer had returned to Fort Dodge.

A 16-year-old sex offender is living at an unlicensed children's care facility operated by the Harvest Baptist Church of Fort Dodge.

The facility, Anchor Character Training Center, 1940 225th St., is a coed home for troubled teens.

Trevor James Fuhrman was convicted in 2005 of fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct with a girl under the age of 13, according to the Iowa Sex Offender Registry. Fuhrman was convicted outside of the state.

Anchor Character Training Center has had 24 runaway juveniles, a child endangerment charge that involved a paddling incident and one case of criminal mischief in the past 10 years, according to Webster County Sheriff Brian Mickelson. No charges were filed in these cases. The facility houses about 35 teens, according to recent information submitted to The Messenger.

Meanwhile, the facility, which has been in operation since 1996 at the former Webster County Home, does not have written certification to be a children's center in Iowa, according to Roger Munns, Iowa Department of Human Services spokesman.

Iowa Code 237B.1 defines a children's center as a privately funded facility designed to serve seven or more children who are not under the custody or authority of the DHS, juvenile court or another governmental agency.

Sgt. Luke Fleener, Webster County Sheriff's Department, said Fuhrman's placement at Anchor is court-ordered, and he is in the custody of Anchor.

Fleener said he does not believe Fuhrman is in violation of the sex offender registry laws. However, the interpretation of the Iowa Sex Offender Registry law is determined by the applicable county attorney.

"I prosecute these cases if it is brought to me, if there is a possible violation," said Webster County Attorney Tim Schott. "Right now that hasn't happened."

Munns said certification or licensing standards had not been written because DHS wasn't aware that the facility existed until The Messenger informed it.

"It hasn't risen to the top of the pile," Munns said. "It will be written soon. It has not been a high priority, but it is now."

In establishing certification or licensing standards for a children's center, DHS is required to consult with the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals, Department of Education, Department of Public Health, state fire marshal and community-based providers of services.



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Several of these departments have already been consulted and the certification should be written within the next few months, Munns said.

"The law specifically prohibits us from making decisions on program content," Munns said. "What it will include is things like fire safety, medications properly stored, emergency numbers for parents, things that are very similar to regulations for child care facilities."

Munns said the state has no idea how many of the children's centers exist in Iowa.

"If people tell us about them, we become aware of them," he said.

According to its Web site, Anchor Character Training Center does not charge for juveniles to come to the facility, but instead asks the parents to give what they can. The main goal of the facility is to "help young people get their lives disciplined to the ways of God according to the Bible."

Marvin E. Smith, the pastor who runs the Harvest Baptist Church and the Anchor Character Training Center, returned a phone call for an interview, but then took another phone call before answering any questions. Smith did not call back by press time.

#### Other unlicensed facilities

The Messenger began investigating Anchor Character Training Center after learning that a man with a long history of running lockdown Christian boarding schools for troubled girls is living in Fort Dodge and has expressed interest in purchasing a church here.

Fort Dodge native Michael Palmer, 69, and his wife, Patty, were banned from running any unlicensed facility in California in 1992 following an investigation into his school, Victory Christian Academy.

Another facility, Genesis by the Sea, an all-girls Christian facility in Ensenada, Mexico, was reportedly owned by Palmer and ordered to close in 2004 after Mexican authorities found evidence of abuse and neglect.

Palmer has also been the target of numerous allegations from former students that include child abuse, brainwashing and rape.

Palmer declined to give a formal interview, but answered a few questions by phone. "So much has been said that is not true," he said. "We want to live our lives in peace."

The Messenger was notified about Palmer by Michele Ulriksen, a former student of Palmer's, who has written a book "Reform at Victory" that gives her chilling account of a year spent at Palmer's facility in Ramona, Calif. The facility was closed in 1992 when officials determined the facility had health, fire and safety hazards.

Another former student, Rebecca Ramirez, led a protest five years ago at Palmer's Victory Christian Academy in Jay, Fla. Ramirez said Palmer became obsessed with her, raped her and offered to buy her from her parents for \$25,000. Following the protest in 2004, where she held up a sign that read "Mike Palmer rapist lives here," the school was renamed Lighthouse of North West Florida.

Palmer said he had not been involved with the facility for five years.

"We don't even go to Florida anymore," he said.

Palmer's Fort Dodge home at 1604 Elmhurst Ave., as well as a large storage building at 8 S. 17th St., are owned by Good Samaritans of North West Florida Inc. The same corporation filed an article of incorporation for the business address of Victory Christian Academy in Jay, Fla., on Dec. 10, 2004, but was later incorporated by Genesis Ministries Inc.

"It was not my call," Palmer said in reference to having his property listed with the corporation.

Palmer said he looked at a church in Fort Dodge, but it was for some friends who wanted to convert it into a convalescent home for elderly people.

Cindy Mulroney, an Iowa Realty agent, who has been showing a church building at 1633 N. 29th St., confirmed that Palmer looked at the building on May 29, 2008.

"I had a Realtor's open house and he showed up at the end," Mulroney said. "He told me he was working with (another agent) and I know he's looked at it one more time since then."

Mulroney said Palmer introduced himself as a pastor who had owned a church in Florida and said he was retired.

"He said he was thinking about being a pastor again," she said.

Mulroney declined to say which agent Palmer is now working with.

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