



NEWS

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Outdoor Therapeutic Program to close Dec. 31

Cleveland-based camp succumbs to state budget cuts

by Debbie Gilbert

White County News

Camp Appalachian Wilderness, a state-subsidized facility north of Cleveland that helps troubled teens, is set to close Dec. 31.

The Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities announced last week that the White County program was no longer financially sustainable.

"The Outdoor Therapeutic Program (which the Cleveland camp is part of) is running more than \$1.2 million in the hole," said Thomas Wilson, spokesman for the Department of Behavioral Health.

In addition to the Cleveland program, OTP operates the Roosevelt Wilderness Program in Warm Springs. The state plans to cut 12 employee positions at Warm Springs, but Wilson said the Middle Georgia program is not being eliminated, at least not in the immediate future.

In Cleveland, all 26 OTP employees will lose their jobs.

"Some of them may be able to move into other positions available in our department," said Wilson. "We have some positions in other places that are funded but not filled."

Joe Baumgartner, director of Camp Appalachian Wilderness, said he is deeply saddened by the impending closure.

"(The camp) has been operating since 1974, and I've been here for 14 years, starting as a counselor," he said. "It's such a part of my life."

But aside from the personal loss to Baumgartner and the other employees, he said the closing of the camp does a disservice to Georgia's youth.

"This program is so unique because the kids are here for six to 12 months," he said. "It's not a 'summer camp,' and it's not a 'boot camp.' We teach social skills by rewarding good behavior."

The camp serves boys ages 12 through 17 who have been referred by the Department of Juvenile Justice. Baumgartner said most have had numerous run-ins with the law.

"They typically have aggressive behaviors, lack of impulse control, lack of respect for authority," he said.

But after spending months camping in the wilderness, coping with challenges and learning to depend on each other, most boys experience a transformation. Baumgartner said the program has a success rate of about 75 percent, meaning the majority of

graduates do not re-enter the justice system.

He said until October 2008, the program received funding directly from the state.

"But then we were eliminated from the state budget," he said. "We were transitioned into receiving a per diem (for each child) from the Department of Juvenile Justice. But their budget has been cut, too."

The Cleveland program can accommodate up to 44 children, but currently serves only 15 because of the drop in referrals. Nine employees were laid off last February to reduce costs.

Baumgartner said the state pays the camp \$164 per child per day. While that may seem expensive, he said it's less than what the state pays to incarcerate teenagers, which costs more than \$200 per day.

Lee Johnson, head of the state's child and adolescent community mental health program, attributes the camp's loss of referrals to the state's fiscal crisis. He said he doesn't believe it's related to a highly publicized incident that took place four years ago.

Camper Travis Parker, 14, died on April 21, 2005, after being held under restraint for 90 minutes. The boy was asthmatic and allegedly was not allowed to use his inhaler while restrained.

Five counselors were fired and a sixth resigned. All were initially charged with murder in Parker's death, but the charges were later dismissed.

"I think (the situation) was appropriately corrected and dealt with," said Johnson.

He said another strike against Cleveland's program was that it only serves boys.

"Warm Springs is equipped to accommodate both males and females," he said. "To bring female (clients) to Cleveland, we would have to replace some of their male staff with female staff."

Baumgartner doesn't think that's a valid argument.

"We could accommodate girls in a heartbeat," he said. "We do already have some female staff. It's very upsetting to us (that we weren't allowed to go co-ed)."

Johnson said every child in the Cleveland program will have a transition plan to provide for his future care.

"Each child has a local mental health provider, and that will continue," he said. "There are also other types of residential programs available (through other agencies)."

Baumgartner said four of the boys in the Cleveland program will be moved to Warm Springs, and three others will be ready to graduate in December.

But he fears that there are many Georgia children whose mental-health needs will not be met.

"The need is going to increase," he said. "As the economy worsens, families tend to have more problems."

Baumgartner said he will be meeting soon with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, which leases the land off Albert Reid Road on which the camp is located. He said no one knows what will happen with the property, which includes a new dining hall, laundry, school, shower house, warehouse and more.

Wilson said closing Cleveland's OTP is not a decision that was made lightly.

"This is not a step we've been looking forward to," he said. "It has been a good program."

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