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Deaf academy's troubles stretch Mount Dora police thin

June 23, 2009 | By Martin E. Comas, Sentinel Staff Writer

MOUNT DORA -- With its green lawns and trim landscaping, the exterior of the National Deaf Academy projects tranquility. But inside the psychiatric residential facility, it's anything but calm, police say.

Police reports show that officers regularly are called to break up fights between patients and staff, quell suicide attempts or search for residents who have walked away from the facility for deaf, hard-of-hearing and autistic children and adults. In a 17-month period through May 27, police responded to 369 calls to the privately owned academy.

"They are using an incredible amount of our police resources," police Chief Randy Scoggins said, "and the things we're being asked to do are things that trained professionals should be doing. . . . We are in essence providing [security] staff for them."

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By comparison, the nearby Walmart Supercenter store generated the second-highest number of calls to police, averaging about 10 calls per month for the past 14 months.

Mount Dora officials recently cited the academy with a code-enforcement violation, saying it failed to comply with terms of a city permit that states the facility will not adversely affect the public interest and is not detrimental to the character of the area.

But academy officials point out that since a new chief executive officer was put in charge of the NDA in April and implemented new safety measures, the number of calls to police has decreased dramatically. In April, there were five calls, including two for disturbances and one for a missing resident. In May, there were only two calls regarding fights.

In responding to the city's citation for a code-enforcement violation, an attorney for the academy sent a letter to Mount Dora officials Wednesday saying steps had been taken at the facility to reduce calls to police. Among those steps were training staff on various behavior-management techniques, hiring a security company and installing a chain-link fence around the 14-acre campus off U.S. Highway 441.

"Nobody from NDA [National Deaf Academy] is happy about the more than 300 calls for service," said Tavares attorney Robert Williams, who represents the academy. "That's unreasonable, and we're trying to fix that. . . . We want to continue being good citizens, and we have taken steps."

Anything but routine

Scoggins applauded the measures but said he's not convinced the problem is fixed.

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