



July 29, 2009

AHCA report cites kicking, spitting on teens, other reported abuses at Devereux House

By Jennifer Portman and Matt Gilmour
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

A Tallahassee group home for troubled teens currently under criminal investigation by law-enforcement officials was shut down by state health-care regulators in May following troubling reports of physical and verbal abuse of residents by center employees.

The Leon County Sheriff's Office will not discuss details of the open and ongoing investigation of the Tallahassee Specialized Therapeutic Group Home run by the not-for-profit Devereux Foundation, Inc., and it has yet to make any arrests in connection with the case.

But a report by Florida's Agency for Health Care Administration from an unannounced May 22 inspection of the 12-bed facility on residential Idlewild Drive cites a long list of reported abuses by staff members, including kicking and spitting on the teenage residents while they were in restraints, body slamming them against walls and force-feeding them medication.

"Based on observation and interviews, the provider failed to ensure that four of 10 children were treated with dignity and respect in an environment free from abuse," the investigation report states.

The majority of alleged abuses were carried out by three employees, one of which was hired despite having an open warrant from Jacksonville for domestic violence from 2008. Employees at such facilities are required to undergo background checks. In its response, Devereux said it ran the required review of the man's criminal history and checked with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, but nothing came up.

That staff member, known in the AHCA report as Employee No. 7, is reported to have verbally abused residents, twisted arms and stood by with other staffers while two teens fought each other to the ground, one throwing a flower pot at the other. One resident said the employee threw and hit him or her with a shoe, presenting inspectors with a pink, low-heeled sandal.

"The client stated having been treated 'horribly' at the facility and showed the surveyor a bruise on the right leg and left hip," the report said.

Two other employees are frequently cited in the report for yelling, threatening, hitting and humiliating residents. The report also says windows weren't properly secured and monitored, allowing residents to easily run away. In the last year, the Tallahassee Police Department responded to about 50 calls to the home for criminal mischief, runaways, battery and verbal disturbances.

One employee wrote to her supervisors in early May concerned about what she was seeing and hearing from residents, but she felt ignored.

"The employee said she reported incidents to the facility coordinator and shift supervisor and is always told, 'it's a training issue,' or 'this is a young staff,'" the investigator wrote.

No sexual abuse was noted in the report. One resident told investigators on that Friday of the

inspection, when the home was shut down: "I will say they (staff) will slam you around, but no sexual abuse is going on."

The LCSO began investigating the residential treatment facility after two teens made a complaint to a school resource deputy, said spokesman Sgt. Tony Drzewiecki. Troubled by its findings, the Sheriff's Office notified AHCA, which licenses the facility, and the Department of Children and Families, which made referrals there mostly through its local contract administrator Big Bend Community Based Care.

"They informed us they were not comfortable with us continuing to have children placed there," said Mike Watkins, CEO of Big Bend Community Based Care.

Within 24 hours of AHCA going in, his agency found placements for the 10 children there, five of whom, Watkins said, had been referred there through the local group. Most were able to stay in the area; one was relocated to Orlando.

Watkins said all residential facilities face complaints, but he was surprised by the allegations concerning the Devereux House Tallahassee. The nonprofit operates centers in 11 states and runs many other programs in Florida, including a facility in Woodville that remains open.

"Devereux has always been known as one of the best-run programs in the state," Watkins said.

The company's facilities focus on providing services for children and adolescents with emotional, behavioral or psychological problems, said Lindsey Phillips, director of external affairs for Devereux Florida in Orlando. Phillips said she could not comment on the ongoing investigation, but stressed that the company doesn't take the charges lightly and welcomes the investigation.

"Any time any allegation is made it is taken very seriously," she said. "Their priority is our priority: the safety and well-being of our youth."

The Tallahassee facility has not been closed before, but there have been previous complaints. It was also the subject of a December 2008 AHCA investigation that cited the facility for three deficiencies, including not properly maintaining personnel records.

Devereux is currently working with AHCA on a plan for corrective action, but it is not yet known when the facility may reopen. Staff members had to be let go, executive Director Steve J. Murphy said in a letter to the agency, and new employees will need to be hired. The facility employed 15-20 people, company officials said.

A June 12 stipulation agreement between the company and the agency prohibits the facility from admitting any patients until the state is confident it can prove it can meet the minimum standards "to protect and provide for the health, safety and welfare of patients."

Something, the state agency stated, the home had not been doing.

- Contact reporter Jennifer Portman at 599-2154 or jportman@tallahassee.com
-