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Family: Utah too far to send troubled teen for treatment

By PATRICIA BROOKS ARENBURG Staff Reporter

The family of a troubled Cole Harbour boy is going to court today to keep authorities from sending him to a youth facility in Utah.

"He's gonna come back, we're all (going to be) distant, we're all (going to be) strangers here," his grandmother said. "We know we love each other. He knows we're mom and dad, . . . but it ain't gonna be the same. There's a distance there."

The 14-year-old boy, raised by his maternal grandparents since he was four, is at a short-term treatment centre in the temporary care of the Community Services Department. If the family isn't successful, he will be sent to Cinnamon Hills Youth Crisis Center for an undetermined time.

The boy, who cannot be named, is a habitual runaway who has done crack cocaine and had sex with women several years older, his grandmother said. He was in the province's care for eight months and spent most of that time "locked up" in Nova Scotia Youth Facility in Waterville, the grandmother said. He had racked up 27 charges and even crashed a stolen car during that time, she said.

The family has been told that the boy may have attention deficit disorder and fetal alcohol syndrome, along with a host of other possible problems. It's not that the family doesn't want him to get help, the grandmother said. But with local programs available as well as some closer than Utah, such as in Maine, the family wonders why he needs to go so far away. "We have children right here in our own province that's getting that help. . . . Why is this child so different?" the grandmother asked.

Vicki Wood, the Community Services Department's director of child welfare, said there are about 1,700 children in the department's care. Less than two per cent of those children need out-of-province treatment and care. The province said it costs almost the same to send young people to Cinnamon Hills as it does to keep them here, over \$111,000 a year. Nova Scotia has sent 20 children in the last four years to Cinnamon Hills, five hours south of Salt Lake City.

Although there are programs to deal with youngsters facing emotional and behavioural problems here in Nova Scotia, some have greater challenges due to developmental delays, neurological problems and fetal alcohol syndrome — "combination issues that make your treatment particularly difficult," Ms. Wood said.

The distance isn't the only concern for the family. The grandmother said she was contacted by people in Utah who told her about alleged abuses at the facility. A woman who worked at Cinnamon Hills was arrested on sex-related charges against a teenage girl there.

Community Services officials contacted the facility and found that the woman had no contact with any of the Nova Scotia teenagers there. They also determined the facility followed proper procedures after the allegations arose.

The family is scheduled to appear in Halifax family court today where a judge will determine whether the courts have the authority to restrict the department from sending the boy to Utah.

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