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Vision for Youth had multiple problems, managed teen felons

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Springfield, Ohio — Vision for Youth, Inc. maintained four facilities in Springfield and at one time had teens from the foster care system and juvenile felons, ages 13 to 18, from as many as ten counties enrolled in its boot-camp-style program.

Vision had a history of problems, according to state records, but by all accounts the home's child-care staff managed a difficult population — children that were hard to place anywhere else because of criminal records and emotional problems, said Brian Harter, a spokesman for Ohio's Department of Job and Family Services.

"You look at these kids' backgrounds...(they) have a lot of issues, and they have situations that require special attention," Harter said. "It's not an easy situation for the staff to deal with on a day-to-day basis. But that's not to condone anything."

Harter said that while state law allows staff at group homes to physically restrain minors, staff are prohibited from administering physical discipline. Punching a juvenile, for instance — which happened at a Vision facility — is grounds for revocation of the home's license.

On at least three occasions, licensing specialists investigating complaints about Vision recommended its license be revoked, but the home was allowed to continue operating.

Homes like Vision, which accept difficult-to-place youths, are expensive and in short supply, according to Cathy Appel, deputy director of Clark County Children Services. And Harter admits the state, whose role is to regulate and license such homes, is reluctant to close them, and so extend their management every opportunity to become compliant.

Anne Stevens, spokesperson for Montgomery County Job and Family Services, which pulled children from the program after a video was released showing a teen from her county being manhandled, said her agency likely wouldn't have sent kids there again — even if it had managed to keep its license.

"We need to ensure that children like these, who are already traumatized by their circumstances, are not re-victimized by the system," Stevens said.

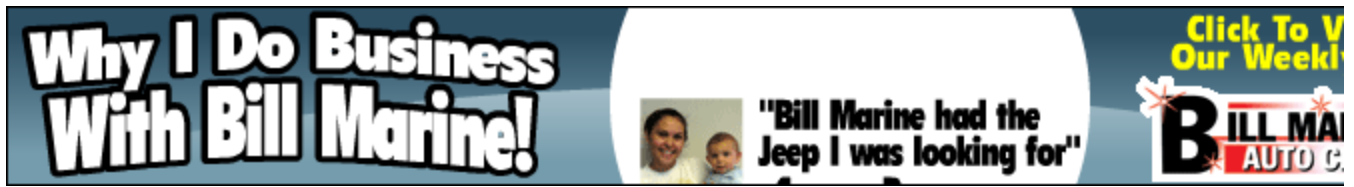
Records maintained by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services on the home between 2001 and 2007 show that:

- In February 2001, the state received a complaint that a staff member had choked a youth at the home. In records that document the investigation, the licensing specialist for the state cited the use of "inappropriate restraints" lacking "proper justification." The staff member was fired.
- In December 2001, a licensing specialist recommended the home's license be revoked following an incident in which the home's CEO, Ralph Williams, handcuffed a youth. Williams was a probation officer with the Clark County Juvenile Cour, but the youth was placed in the home by Franklin County authorities, and therefore out of Williams' jurisdiction.
- In January 2002, a licensing specialist recommended the home's license be revoked following a complaint that staff failed to report or even document an instance of one of the residents running away from one of the program's facilities in February of the previous year.
- In February 2002, a licensing specialist wrote "the recommendation... continues to be revocation of the agency's license" following an investigation of complaints of excessive force, and that residents were not receiving enough to eat. When Williams appealed the state's finding of noncompliance, his appeal was denied.
- In October 2002, Williams failed to report an allegation of abuse or neglect of a youth in the program to the police or to the county that placed the youth in his custody. State law requires a licensed group home report mere suspicion of abuse or neglect.
- In April 2003, a staff member admitted to punching a boy at the home in the face and bloodying his nose. The child-care worker was reported to have been fired over the incident. However, state documents show that he was suspended temporarily without pay.
- In June 2006, a youth alleged that a member of the staff had slammed another boy against a wall. During the investigation, other residents at the home corroborated the account, but the claim could not be substantiated in part because the staff member had been fired. Williams declined to provide the investigator with the former employee's phone number or address.
- In August 2007, the state received a complaint that the home failed to provide timely medical care for a youth injured in a fight. The subsequent investigation found the home had failed to keep track of the medication administered to residents, and also was not reporting AWOL incidents and criminal activity to their kids' placement agencies.

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