

TNS HOME

SIGN UP

LOG IN

CONTACT

ABOUT

ARCHIVE

RADIO SHOW

STAFF BLOG

CORRECTIONS

[The NewStandard ceased publishing on April 27, 2007.](#)

Behavior Modification Money Trail

by Michelle Chen

Government connections enable ?teen help? industry to thwart regulation.

This sidebar is associated with a full-length feature article, [At Some Youth ?Treatment? Facilities, ?Tough Love? Takes Brutal Forms*](#).

The controversial world of youth behavior-modification facilities intersects with a web of intricate political connections. And where the treatment industry sees cooperation with government entities, activists warn,

these links could cloud the prospects for public oversight of the "teen-help" market.



The influence of the behavior-modification industry is felt on Capitol Hill. Four members of the House of Representatives and one senator serve as honorary board members of Kids Helping Kids, a company with corporate links to a now-defunct behavior-modification program for teen drug users known as Straight Incorporated. The various franchises of that program dissolved in the early 1990s following allegations of child abuse, as well as criticism for using cruel, prisoner-of-war-style brainwashing techniques on adolescents.

Watchdog groups report that Straight Inc. has since morphed into the Drug Free America Foundation, a conservative anti-drug advocacy group. The co-founder, Mel Sembler, is a longtime Republican Party donor and fundraiser who served as ambassador to Italy for the current administration and ambassador to Australia under George H.W. Bush.

The connections are even more direct on the state level. Earlier this year in Montana, a landmark bill to impose regulatory guidelines on adolescent residential treatment facilities was squelched by a powerful lobbying campaign from private service providers. Proposed partially in response to reports of abuse and deaths in some treatment programs, the bill would have authorized the state Department of Health and Human Services to monitor private behavior-modification programs. According to government estimates, Montana contains over two dozen of these institutions, ranging from "wilderness"-based programs to disciplinary boarding academies.

To eclipse the bill, private treatment companies pushed their own legislation, which would effectively place

regulatory authority not with the health department but with a five-member board under the Department of Labor. Three of the board's members are representatives of the teen treatment industry, including state Representative Paul Clark, who directs a local therapeutic wilderness program. The bill, which was recently approved by the legislature, requests no public funding and specifically exempts church-affiliated and "faith-based" programs.

According to state records, Spring Creek Lodge, an affiliate of World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASPS), spent over \$50,000 on lobbying activities to help push the bill through the legislature.

In Utah, the WWASPS name is prominently linked to the Republican Party. The *Salt Lake City Tribune* reported that between 2002 and 2004, WWASPS founder Robert Lichfield, his family, and business associates have contributed a total of more than \$1 million to Republican candidates and party organizations — a financial push that coincided with the killing of a 2004 initiative in the state legislature to regulate teen residential treatment facilities.

Charles Huffine, an adolescent psychiatrist who has joined other mental health professionals in urging stronger oversight of residential treatment facilities, is wary of attempts by industry interests to co-opt the regulatory process. "It's the fox-guarding-the-chicken-coop kind of thing," he remarked.

But rather than a conflict of interest, some in the teen help industry see a healthy partnership with officials. In interviews with *The NewStandard*, WWASPS representatives described a good working relationship between their enterprises and the agencies charged with checking up on them, like state departments of education and, at Tranquility Bay in Jamaica, the United States Embassy.

"I'm all for law enforcement," said WWASPS President Ken Kay. "I think all of our schools work closely with law enforcement and would welcome their visit every day."

© 2005 [The NewStandard](#). All rights reserved. The NewStandard is a non-profit publisher that encourages noncommercial reproduction of its content. Reprints must prominently attribute the author and The NewStandard, hyperlink to <http://newstandardnews.net> (online) or display newstandardnews.net (print), and carry this notice. For more information or commercial reprint rights, please see the TNS [reprint policy](#).

[The NewStandard ceased publishing on April 27, 2007.](#)

[Michelle Chen](#) is a staff journalist.

Recent contributions by Michelle Chen:

MORE →
