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## **Highfields cited for violations 'Substantial' problems found, but state not releasing details**

By Steve Miller  
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The state Department of Human Services has cited Highfields Inc. for a number of violations, according to board members at Highfields and state officials.

The sanctions are contained in an investigative report sent Friday to the Onondaga-based social services agency, which operated a residential program for troubled youth.

"I understand there are citations issued pertaining to incidents here," said Highfields Board Member Brian Cavanaugh. "And it's our sincere desire to do whatever we have to in order to satisfy the state."

Two employees in the Highfields' youth care program were fired last month after an investigation found they had taken a resident outside in frigid weather without a coat.

Follow-up inquiries found other incidents of possible mistreatment.

Both the state and Ingham County removed all of their children in Highfields' youth care program amid mounting allegations of misconduct and poor training practices.

State spokeswoman Karen Stock confirmed that Highfields was cited for "substantial multiple rule violations." She said the DHS report will be available within 10 days.

The citations, which the members and the DHS spokeswoman would not detail, give Highfields a set amount of time to remedy the problems, said Highfields Board Chairman Charles Corley.

"We will correct our problems and be a better organization for having gone through this," Corley said.

In the wake of the state investigation and its citations, staffing changes and vast policy retooling are possible, Cavanaugh said.

"We are going to have to address staffing, as well as everything else," he said. "Nothing is off the table."

Three weeks ago, the Highfields board promised a panel of Ingham County judges who have referred youths to the agency that it would devise a corrective action plan.

Cavanaugh said Highfields is waiting for the plan to be reviewed by an expert, "to ensure that our policies and practices are the best they can be."

The report for the judges will be finalized after that review, which is expected to take place in the next week or so, he said.

The board also was waiting for the state's investigation, he added, in hopes that it would shed additional light on possible remedies.

Meanwhile, the judges wonder where the corrective action plan is, and they are ready to seek other agencies in which to place troubled youngsters.

The county stopped using Highfields, removing its 18 boys and losing an option for residential treatment.

"We have kids that need care and we are investigating other facilities to use," said Ingham County Probate Judge Richard Garcia. "We lost our short-term relief."

That said, Garcia - a longtime advocate for Highfields - is hopeful the agency will right the ship.

"I would love to use it," Garcia said. "A lot of kids have been helped at Highfields."

Also last week, a report compiled by several Ingham County judges was turned over to the state and the Highfields board for review.

In that confidential report obtained by the Lansing State Journal, several Highfields employees allege numerous cases of malfeasance, including the backdating of incident reports and a child in the care of the agency who was hospitalized without notifying any authorizing agencies.

According to one account, as the state began its investigation into Highfields in mid-February, a supervisor backdated incident reports.

The results of a criminal inquiry by the Ingham County Sheriff's Department were turned over to the prosecutor's office last week.

That information, described by a prosecutor as a "fair amount" of material, is being reviewed.

Corley said Highfields would be ready to accept kids after the state and the judges review its plan.

"I would like to think we can be open to kids again in weeks," he said. "But you can never tell."

EDITOR'S NOTE: LSJ Editorial Page Editor Mark Nixon is a member of Highfields' board. To avoid a conflict of interest, Nixon has recused himself from board meetings.