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## Agency serving troubled youth has troubles of its own



By Charles Hallman

Young people protest at Freeport West's St. Paul office.

BY CHARLES HALLMAN, MINNESOTA SPOKESMAN-RECORDER

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Freeport West is a 41-year-old nonprofit human services agency that provides programs and services to at-risk youth and young families, with offices in Minneapolis and St. Paul. After several years of turmoil and the recent firings of its executive director and other staff, the agency may be currently facing its worst crisis in those 41 years of service to the community.

A new interim Freeport executive director was selected last week to replace former executive director Ramona Wilson, who was hired almost four years ago. She "is moving on...to pursue other professional opportunities," according to a March 16 press release. Wilson's departure was followed a day later by the unexpected firing of five staff members at the St. Paul office. One of them, Sherrie Ellis, said the interim executive director told her that she was let go due to lack of funding.

Former St. Paul office manager Dora Darnes said that, when told she was fired, "I was in shock and devastated." She was hired last June. "A lot of these kids come to depend on a lot of us and get a lot of different things from different staff people."

The series of events are puzzling, said Rev. Devin Miller of St. Paul last week, including closing the St. Paul office for two days after the firings. "You don't fire [the executive director] on Tuesday and then drop five staff on Thursday without due process," he pointed out.

Miller said that he met with Freeport Board Chair Fred Blocton once he learned of the firings and asked about "\$115,000 on the table" for the St. Paul office. "How can you tell me that there is no money when you approved a budget with [a three-percent increase], then all of a sudden you fire five people?"

"We served over 700 kids" since the St. Paul office opened in 2008, Ellis noted. "It's all about the kids and what they need. I'm worried as to what is going to happen."

The minister and other community folk are strongly suggesting that what is happening to the Freeport's St. Paul office could be the result of a tug-of-war between Blocton and Wilson. When the MSR last week contacted Blocton for comment, he responded with a March 24 prepared statement: "Freeport's board of directors, management team and staff are committed to providing quality programming...providing uninterrupted, quality services to at-risk [youth] is our number one priority."

However, two individuals formerly connected with Freeport have pointed out that the nonprofit organization might have been mismanaged during Wilson's tenure. "Too many decisions were made without doing the proper homework," including opening the St. Paul office, said a former board member who spoke to the MSR on condition of anonymity.

According to a March 16 press release, Freeport has hired an interim financial management team and a local firm to assist with compliance and reporting and is conducting a search for a chief financial officer. Although we were originally promised that our interview requests would be met, a Freeport spokeswoman subsequently told the MSR that neither Blocton nor anyone else with the organization would answer any more questions,



including confirming reports of recent audits by several funding sources that found financial discrepancies under Wilson's leadership.

"When [Wilson] came in, the organization was very financially stable," said a former Freeport staffer who was on board when Wilson arrived. The person, who spoke to the MSR on condition of anonymity, added that the former executive director's management style had contributed to a constant turnover of staff.

"[Wilson] has a tremendous ego," added the former staffer. "I was in a position that I couldn't agree with the things she was doing."

Although at the time several board members did not support Wilson's candidacy for the job because of her limited nonprofit experience, the former board member said they eventually did support her hiring. "But just two months into hiring her, I was very sorry that I did," the person admitted, adding that there was a constant clash of egos between the former executive director and the board.

"Ramona came in there with very corporate ideals and not nonprofit reality. Clearly because of Ramona and the direction she started taking Freeport, we knew we could not go in that direction because it would pull Freeport down."

Later nearly half of the Freeport board left, "and not one of us had planned to leave," the individual pointed out. "She [Wilson] strategically got rid of the key people that we felt over the years was the glue to running Freeport."

Miller said last week that the five fired workers should be brought back, as well as Wilson, who is a member of Miller's congregation. He helped organized a March 22 rally protesting the firings outside Freeport's St. Paul office, mostly composed of young people and other supporters. "We are going to demand a meeting with the interim director and the board to find out exactly what's going on," Miller told the MSR beforehand.

"It's not right," said 20-year-old Puol Both, who was among the nearly 30 or so persons attending the half-hour gathering. "I think you should keep [the office] open if you got something in the community that helps out the young teens."

Once an organization with board members having 10-20 years' experience and staff members with multi-year tenures, the former board member believes that Freeport is now being run by persons with limited or no background in nonprofit social services work.

The longtime former Freeport worker concluded that these recent and past events could prove permanently harmful to the organization. "It absolutely will have a negative effect on Freeport. I think they already lost a lot of reputation on how they do services. It is a difficult time for all nonprofits right now. I don't know if it can survive that."

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**Charles Hallman**

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[Ramona Wilson](#)

Submitted by Robert Albee, Ventura Village Chairperson (not verified) on Wed, 2011-04-06 23:04.

I had the pleasure of working with Ramona Wilson for nearly a year in the re-opening of the Minneapolis' Phillips Community Center. All of us were repeatedly impressed by her complete professionalism, and leadership skills in dealing with difficult people and situations. We will miss Ramona very much!

I believe I speak for many people representing a wide variety of Phillips Community and official neighborhood organizations.

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