

## **Oregon slow to deal with troubled facilities for troubled kids**

**Posted by Ann Ereline December 20, 2008 15:29PM**

SALEM -- Authorities knew of problems at two institutions that house Oregon's most troubled children: Kids getting the wrong medication; workers with criminal records; a teen with a broken collarbone after a fight with staff; and unsupervised mentally ill youths.

But instead of closing the institutions, state licensing officials spent several months warning the Kirkland Institute near Burns and the Pendleton Academies in eastern Oregon.

It was only after authorities feared that children were in danger that they cracked down and blocked new admissions. At Kirkland, for instance, another teen in state protective custody was taken to the emergency room after a run-in with staff. At Pendleton, a 17-year-old was charged with raping a 13-year-old girl.

Why did the state wait months to act?

The answer is complicated and may be considered by the Legislature next year.

Few places in Oregon -- especially rural Oregon -- will take in kids with severe behavioral or mental health issues, and officials worried there would be nowhere else for these children to go.

Also, Oregon has only two licensing specialists to oversee 240 so-called private child caring agencies -- a category that includes everything from boarding schools to mental health treatment centers.

Erinn Kelley-Siel, interim director of the state's Children, Adults and Families Division, said she's considering asking the 2009 Legislature to allow the state to levy fees in order to hire more staff and to grant the legal authority to impose civil penalties at the first sign of trouble.

"Short of suspending their license, we have no alternative kind of remedy," Kelley-Siel said. "I think this could make a big difference in the lives of hundreds of kids."

Typically, group homes, mental health treatment centers and other state-licensed child care agencies get a visit from a licensing specialist once every two years.

### **Rejected boys**

It was during one of those visits that licensing coordinator Monika Kretzschmar discovered serious problems at the Kirkland Institute for Child and Family Study, where the Oregon Youth Authority sends boys and the Department of Human Services puts teen boys who have been rejected by family foster homes or other group placements.

Kretzschmar learned that some on Kirkland's staff had criminal histories and others lacked the qualifications for their job. Neither the state nor Kirkland would discuss the specifics of those criminal histories with The Oregonian.

She also found medication logs indicating the boys did not receive their prescribed meds, were given another boy's pills or, in one instance, a teen was taken to the hospital because staff gave him an accidental overdose.

Kretzschmar followed with a letter listing 19 corrective actions Kirkland must take to retain its license. A few weeks later, Kirkland named a new executive director.

"We're trying to do everything we can," Rich Streeter, Kirkland's newly hired executive director told The Oregonian. "You're talking about some of the most difficult kids in Oregon, and some of the most difficult to place. We're making sure we're providing them with a safe, secure environment when they're here."

But problems continued.

In September, the state received a report that a Kirkland employee broke a teen's collarbone while trying to subdue him. An investigation by the state Office of Investigations and Training found that the actions taken by Kirkland staff constituted child abuse.

On Sept. 19, Erin Fultz at the Oregon Youth Authority e-mailed her supervisor: "I just feel uncomfortable with our youth staying there since there have been so many red flags over the last several months."

Just before Thanksgiving, the state received a report of a Kirkland teen taken to the emergency room after a run-in with staff. That's when state authorities closed Kirkland to new admissions and began finding places to move the 22 teens who were there.

### **A rare licensing move**

It was a rare step. State licensing authorities said they've closed admissions on only half a dozen programs over the past five years.

The last boy was moved out of Kirkland on Thursday, Streeter said.

Kirkland is working with the state so that it can once again accept new admissions, he said.

Meanwhile, in Pendleton, the state Addictions and Mental Health Division informed Pendleton Academies on Nov. 17 that it intended to revoke the institution's certification to provide psychiatric treatment.

Pendleton Academies treats girls and boys ages 5 to 18 who suffer from bipolar disorder, psychosis and other severe mental disorders.

State officials say they've worked with Pendleton to iron out problems since 2005. But last August, they warned Pendleton Academies it needed to improve in eight areas or lose its certification.

Among those areas: ensuring that children receive appropriate treatment for their psychiatric symptoms and that children get adequate supervision.

State officials said they were alarmed that police responded to at least 56 calls at the institution in the first six months of this year.

"Many of the incidents requiring police intervention involved child-to-child assaults resulting in an injury to one or both of the children," notes an Aug. 20 letter from state officials.

The Pendleton Academies board replaced the executive director with Terry Edvalson, and state officials allowed the institution to continue operating.

"The staff has done a significant job in helping turn this place around," Edvalson said.

But state officials said they could not overlook what occurred Oct. 27, when a 17-year-old male is accused of coercing a 13-year-old girl to have sex.

Employees had been told not to allow the two within 15 feet of each other, yet records indicate the boy and girl were unsupervised.

"The people who were responsible for supervision are no longer with us. They were fired," Edvalson said.

Pendleton Academies can appeal to the state to be allowed to continue to operate. In the meantime, Edvalson said earlier this month that his staff was looking for suitable places to send the kids.

"You just don't pull the plug," he said. "Our kids are very fragile, and we need to get them out of here as carefully as we can so we don't do them damage."

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## Comments

### aphasia says...

Lack of funds and lack of oversight. Pretty simple - turn the matter over to the DOJ and see how fast something gets done. Wait a second, Uncle Ted and his cronies have an agenda and these facilities are not part of it. Why can't some money hungry attorney sue the state??

Posted on 12/20/08 at 5:38PM

### OregonTinaLT says...

There is always an agenda - the content of the agenda is what is important. Children, people under the age of 25, who have mental/physical diagnosis or other special needs, should have proper care. If the agenda of a facility is to provide proper care, according to the need of the child, then that facility needs to be equipped to provide the care. The integrity of a care facility can be measured in the way its inmates are treated. Bringing a law suit against the state would not restore integrity to either the state or the care facilities.

Posted on 12/20/08 at 7:05PM

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