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S.C. has no say in youth centers: Little-known facilities hold troubled teens

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SUMMERVILLE -- Many residents were stunned to learn last week that a local youth treatment center was housing violent teens from outside South Carolina. How could this happen, they wondered.

The truth is: The state has almost no control of who is placed in these facilities or where they come from. In many cases, even the local police don't know who is in their backyard.

South Carolina is home to 17 of these treatment centers that house nearly 800 kids and young adults struggling with mental illness, violent behavior and other problems. Many, like Palmetto Summerville Behavioral Health, are privately run facilities.



Photo by Wade Spees

Neighbors of the Palmetto Behavioral Health complex in Summerville have expressed concerns about security at the facility, which is surrounded by a 6-foot-tall wooden fence topped with 18 inches of lattice.

State's involvement

The state Department of Health and Environmental Control licenses these centers but has virtually no say in where they are located or who they accept as clients, agency spokesman Thom Berry said.

DHEC inspectors typically visit these facilities just once every two years unless a complaint is lodged, Berry said. Even then, they are looking at things such as staffing ratios, the dispensing of medication and treatment plans. They don't control admissions or

security measures. These facilities are not required to report escapes; only hospitalizations and deaths, he said.

That doesn't sit well with some town officials following last week's escape of four violence-prone Washington, D.C., teens from Palmetto's 60-bed treatment center on Midland Parkway. One escapee who remains at large had reportedly been charged with attempted murder.

"I'm very concerned," Town Councilman Walter Bailey said. "We have plenty of home-grown thugs in South Carolina without importing them from other states."

Councilman Bob Jackson said he wants town officials to discuss ways to improve security and notification measures at the center. He said a number of residents have spoken to him with concerns about security at the facility, which is surrounded by a 6-foot-tall wooden fence topped with a lattice.

"The gates there I could have climbed when I was 9 years old. When I was a teenager, those gates would have just been fun," Jackson said. "They don't look like they are designed to keep someone in. And my belief is, this was not an isolated case."

Prior incidents

Since February 2006, Summerville police have been called to the facility 128 times. In that time, there have been 12 missing-person calls and seven reports of runaways, police Capt. Michael Donoghue said.

In October 2009, a 15-year-old from the facility was accused of savagely beating a 64-year-old woman after slipping out a side door, according to a police report.

The victim, Toni Kucish, told police she was climbing from her vehicle when the teen started hitting her, knocking her to the ground. He continued to punch her in the head and shoulders while she was down. He ran off after she screamed for help but was quickly caught by staff members from the center, the police report stated.

Staff members told police the teen had run off after asking to get a drink of water. The teen told police he was angry with staff and decided to take it out on the first person he saw, a police report stated.

Geoffrey H. Waggoner, Kucish's attorney, said his client suffered a hemorrhage six months later that caused bleeding on the brain while she was talking to someone about the incident.

"Not only did the institution fail to acknowledge the attack on Ms. Kucish nearly two years ago, from recent events, it appears that meaningful improvements in security are still lacking," he said.

The facilities

Stacey Lindbergh, Palmetto's director of business development and community relations, declined to comment on the episode or anything related to last week's escape, citing patient confidentiality restrictions. The center released a statement last week saying it is

"committed to providing the best possible treatment to its patients and takes their safety and well- being very seriously."

The Summerville facility is one of three operated in South Carolina by Palmetto Behavioral Health System. Palmetto, in turn, is owned by Universal Health Services, a Fortune 500 health management company with some 200 facilities throughout the country. The parent company reported net revenues of \$5.6 billion in 2010.

The Summerville facility is not the only Palmetto Behavioral Health center to have problems. In February 2004, a 21-year-old accused of robbery escaped twice in two weeks from Palmetto's North Charleston treatment center, allegedly kidnapping his children's mother during his time on the run. Two years earlier, a 16-year-old boy was accused of sexually molesting two other boys --ages 12 and 14 -- at the same facility.

Previous coverage

[4 escapees only had to scale fence](#), published 04/23/11

It remains unclear just how many out-of-state offenders are housed at the Palmetto facilities or how long the practice has been going on.

'Needs to change'

Steve Rublee, director of the Medical University Institute of Psychiatry, said it is not uncommon for treatment centers like Palmetto to accept clients from other states that may not have facilities to accommodate all of the youths under their jurisdiction. He ran a child and adolescent residential facility for seven years.

Rublee said the centers provide an important care option for youths dealing with long-term problems. "I think there is very much a need for this long-term care option that residential treatment centers provide," he said.

That may be, but state Rep. Chip Limehouse, R-Charleston, still plans to push for restrictions on the age and level of criminal offender allowed at that type of center. He also wants the state to prohibit these facilities from accepting out-of-state clients with criminal backgrounds.

"The questions are: Why are we even taking in any of these offenders from outside of South Carolina, why are we putting them behind a fence you can buy at Lowe's and how soon can we end this process?" he said. "This practice needs to change."

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