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Desert Hills to stop housing disturbed kids

Layoffs ahead; judge's order was catalyst

By Enric Volante and Rhonda Bodfield Sander The Arizona Daily Star

Desert Hills psychiatric center will lay off more than half its staff and stop housing troubled adolescents by June 4.

The center, where police recently accused a staff member of sexual misconduct, will close the residential program for adolescents that once filled 80 percent of its 114 beds.

"It's a major blow to the care for kids in the community, and we're very sad about it," said Joe W. King, the center's president and CEO.

He said company officials had no choice after Judge John F. Kelly of Pima County Juvenile Court decided April 12 to remove 38 youths, citing safety concerns.

The center, which lost \$2.3 million last year after the death of a teen-age girl, got few admissions after the judge's decision, King said.

Also, the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections withdrew its last five wards from Desert Hills in April, spokesman Steve Meissner said.

Juvenile Corrections has provided the bulk of Desert Hills' clientele since 1994, but its contract with Desert Hills will not be renewed June 5 because of safety concerns, he said.

"We're out of business with them," Meissner said. "We don't have complete confidence in Desert Hills because it seemed there were problems with the monitoring process."

King said more than half the staff of roughly 125 will be gradually laid off starting as early as this week at the westside center, 2797 N. Introspect Drive. Staffers employed for at least a year will get two weeks of severance pay, he said.

About 75 youngsters remain at Desert Hills, including 35 in the residential treatment center that will be phased out in less than a month.

The center's day-treatment program and its charter school will remain open - at least through the summer.

"We're proud of what we've been able to do here," King said. "We were devastated by the two very unfortunate events that occurred here in the last six months."

In February, two teens armed with a baseball bat fractured the skull of a 17-year-old patient outside a Desert Hills group home that was not adequately staffed, state regulators said.

In March, police arrested Steven Chapple, 38, on charges of having improper sexual relations with two patients, ages 14 and 17. [Emphasis added.]

The state also imposed sanctions on Desert Hills Center for Youth and Families last year after a girl's death prompted an investigation of how staff restrained patients. [Emphasis added.]

Despite losing \$2.3 million last year, the for-profit center's small group of owners and investors had resolved to hang on, King said, because they thought they would get a reasonable increase in the rate

the state pays to keep youths at Desert Hills.

However, after the judge refused to discuss his safety concerns, Desert Hills officials on Tuesday stopped admitting adolescents for residential care, King said.

"I don't know what the state's plan is except to build more prisons if they're not going to let kids get treated," he said.

Desert Hills is working closely with parents and other agencies to find places to put youths by June 4, he said.

"We're having to discharge some kids that aren't ready to go."

Other health experts agreed Desert Hills filled a void by taking in severely troubled kids who were tough to place anywhere else.

"Ideally, we would place clients in the area they're from, and there are limited beds in Tucson," said Johnie Golden, a program manager with the Arizona Department of Health Services, which is weighing penalties over the baseball bat incident.

Golden said the agency will look at each youngster's case to find suitable alternatives.

Juvenile Corrections will now rely on 30 other facilities throughout the state, Meissner said.

King said the state has not increased the rate it pays since 1988.

Neal Cash, director of the Community Partnership of Southern Arizona, which controls funding for mental health agencies, said agencies like Desert Hills can try to negotiate higher rates this year, but services are woefully underfunded at the state and federal levels.

The closure means kids who need mental health services may have a tough time in Tucson, he said.

Palo Verde Psychiatric Hospital provides some long-term care, as does the Arizona Children's Association. But there aren't enough beds to fill the need, Cash said.

Some youths may have to go to Sierra Vista, Flagstaff or Phoenix.

"There are no easy, quick solutions," said Judy Johnson, Community Partnership's deputy director.

Arizona Daily Star reporter Hanna Miller contributed to this story.