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Roloff youth homes allowed to reopen

Religious group with state authority accredits facilities

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Staff Writer

Two Corpus Christi youth homes, closed since the 1980s after a lengthy church vs. state battle that drew national attention, have reopened with legal blessing.

The Rebekah Home for Girls and the Anchor Home for Boys, founded by the late evangelist Lester Roloff, have received accreditation from a church group given legal authority by the state, the head of the group says.

The state's insistence since the early 1970s that the homes must submit to regulation was the core issue in the fight between Roloff and the state. The homes are run by People's Baptist Church, which took them over for Roloff in 1979. Roloff died in a plane crash in 1982.



David Pellerin/Caller-Times

The Rebekah Home for Girls is one of two youth homes, along with the Anchor Home for Boys, founded in Corpus Christi by the late evangelist Lester Roloff. The facilities have been allowed to reopen after a U.S. Supreme Court decision forced them to close in 1985.

In February, the homes were accredited by the Texas Association of Christian Child Care Agencies Inc., a private organization created by Gov. George W. Bush last year, said the Rev. Dale Blaser, head of the group.

"We do everything the state does," Blaser said. "We do everything to make sure the children are safe."

Children will be added to the Rebekah and Anchor homes gradually, Blaser said, because it will take time to hire and train staff to run it.

Children will attend school on site and go through an individualized, self-paced program called Accelerated Christian Education. They can also take elective

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courses like home economics or computer classes, Blaser said.

Residents who arrive with drug or alcohol problems must quit cold turkey, he said.

"It's a Bible program. They believe the Bible is the answer," Blaser said. "They learn Bible scriptures and passages and go to chapel every day and church every night."

Annual inspections

Parents will usually check their children into the homes, although youths can also come voluntarily or be sent by a judge, Blaser said.

The Rev. Wiley Cameron, pastor of People's Baptist Church and Roloff's successor, will run the homes, Blaser said. Cameron declined comment Sunday.

The Rebekah and Anchor homes were the first accredited by the agency since it debuted in December, Blaser said. Combined, the two homes can house 250 youths aged 18 or younger, he said. Blaser said there are already about 500 applicants for open housing.

"There's been a lot of people against the homes and it's been a political nightmare for years," Blaser said. "They should have never been closed in the first place. Look at the children who haven't been helped because there was no place to put them. And it has sat empty for all these years."

The Christian agency will re-inspect the homes annually and has the power to take the accreditation away.

The accreditation process is a long one. Aside from reams of forms on questions ranging from the board of directors' names and addresses to the numbers of bathrooms at the facilities, Blaser and six other inspectors visited the homes, Blaser said.

"We want to be sure that the facility is going to take care of the children," Blaser said. "This facility is first class and believe me, I've seen some that aren't."

`Not fancy, but wholesome'

People's Baptist Church operates three homes in addition to the youth homes. They include a home for men 18 to 25, one for men 25 and older, and one for women 18 and older, Blaser said.

The youth homes are a place of last resort for youngsters with a troubled history, he said.

"You ask them if they want to be there and they'll tell

you they don't," Blaser said. "But their parents want them there. It's not fancy, but it's clean and wholesome and well-kept and it's loving."

Abuse allegations

The Texas Attorney General's Office began investigating Roloff's homes in 1973 after former residents made allegations of abuse. The state's effort to require that they be licensed continued to be fought in state and federal courts. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1985 that the homes had to obtain state licenses or shut down. The children from the homes were moved to Missouri.

In the early 1990s, the Texas Department of Human Services sought to stop People's Baptist Church from using temporary managing conservatorships, a form of temporary adoption, to keep children at the homes.

In 1991, state officials dismissed reports of People's Baptist Church operating an unlicensed girls' home after an investigation was conducted.

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