

New Regulations For Youth Treatment Programs Receive Mixed Feedback

Montana Public Radio | By [Aaron Bolton](#)

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Corey Hickman is the Executive Director of the Chrysalis Therapeutic Boarding School, in Eureka. He spoke during a public hearing Thursday, Sept. 12 on new proposed rules for operators of private residential treatment programs kids.

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services held a hearing Thursday on new rules for private residential youth programs. While there was support for the regulations, some of the programs that would fall under the proposed rules said they went too far.

Erica Johnston with Health and Human Services told reporters before Thursday's

hearing that the department consulted with the 18 private residential youth programs statewide that would fall under its proposed list of expanded regulations.

Johnston said site visits also helped inform the overhaul.

"They did help inform the rules packages, just really getting our eyes on what the physical plant looks like and what the rules package might need to look like to accommodate some of the differences in the programs," Johnston said.

The new rules were spurred by a law passed out of the 2019 legislative session calling for more oversight of private residential treatment programs for kids. The programs came under DPHHS oversight July 1.

Some owners of the programs said the department did not consult enough with the small industry.

Corey Hickman is the executive director of the Chrysalis program in Eureka. Hickman and others by and large supported the proposed regulations, but they took issue with some of the specifics, like staffing ratios.

Currently, programs only have to provide a written policy setting their own ratios, but health officials are asking programs to provide one staff per eight children during the day. That ratio moves to one staff for every 12 kids at night.

"We'd like that to be broadened to a one to 15, one to 16 ratio," Hickman said.

John Santa with the Montana Academy echoed Hickman, saying requirements to also have night staff stay awake would cost facilities.

"I thought it was humorous at the end of thing, whoever wrote this said, 'we've examined this and it will have no economic impact on small businesses. That's not true,' Santa said. "This will have a huge impact on small businesses."

Executive Director of Ranch for Kids Bill Sutley also spoke during the hearing. DPHHS suspended Ranch For Kids' license in July and removed 27 children due to severe physical and emotional abuse allegations. That happened only weeks after health officials gained regulatory oversight of the facility and other programs.

Sutley took issue with a rule requiring that children at his facility be provided access to Montana's abuse hotline, though a similar requirement was laid out by the former state board regulating these facilities.

“Well, almost every kid that comes into our program have a perpetrated false allegations of abuse on their parents. That is the population that we serve. So as you can imagine, it would be highly inappropriate to provide a abuse hotline number and access to that to every one of our program participants,” Sutley said.

Former Clearview Horizon employee Jennifer Shaw came out fully in support of the new rules, saying that these private youth programs have up until now, mostly regulated themselves. She adds that the new rules are a minimum standard for a youth population that is extremely vulnerable.

“So having more staff, more accountability is important and these rules are creating that,” Shaw said.

DPHHS will continue to take written public comment on the new rules until Sept. 20. The department says the number of comments it receives will dictate how long it takes to implement the new rules, but they could be in affect by mid-October.

The department says it will work with facilities to come into compliance over time.

Tags

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Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services

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Private Alternative Adolescent Residential or Outdoor Program board

Ranch For Kids

Bill Sutley

Corey Hickman

John Santa

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