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Facilities scarcer for special delinquents

Secure treatment center's collapse due to abuse charges sends mentally ill teens to counties

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By Steve Twedt, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Two years ago, the privately owned New Morgan Academy, combining high security and intense therapy, opened its doors as Pennsylvania's newest alternative for handling delinquent teens with mental illness.

But last week, the Berks County center shut down following the conviction of two staff members on criminal charges and what one juvenile justice official called "an unheard of" number of physical and sexual assault allegations over the past two years.

Previous Coverage

New Morgan Academy: Is this private center the answer?

The abuse cases, including the rough handling of a 15-year-old Allegheny County boy by three staff members in September, means 125 emotionally troubled juveniles are being sent back to their home counties to be placed in other treatment programs.

The problem facing the counties now is the same one that caused them to send teens to New Morgan in the first place -- a shortage of residential facilities that will accept teens who run away, are unpredictably violent and sometimes suicidal.

The placement problem is particularly severe for teen girls, officials say.

"Hopefully we won't have to resort to sending kids out of state," said Jim Rieland, juvenile court administrator for Allegheny County, who has had to find places for nine teen girls and five boys. So far, he added, "We don't have anybody for whom we have no options."

State officials say there were 31 separate substantiated reports of abuse against teen residents during New Morgan Academy's two years of operation. Sixteen cases involved sexual abuse, including the assault of a 15-year-old McKeesport girl in June by a staff member. In some cases, the assaults included sexual intercourse between an adult staff member and a teenage resident.

New Morgan was run by Cornell Companies of Houston, which operates private prisons and other facilities around the nation.

At one point, Rieland said he talked to Cornell officials and had probation officers personally interview every Allegheny County teen at the facility to make sure they were not being mistreated. Following the September assault, however, Rieland said he recommended to judges that no one else from Allegheny County be sent to New Morgan.

By month's end, under pressure from the state, Cornell said it would relinquish its license to operate the facility.

While declining to discuss specifics of individual cases, state officials said none of the 15 acts of physical abuse resulted in broken bones or a resident's hospitalization.

"Most of it would have resulted in bruising, and usually it occurred during an inappropriate restraint," said Leonard Pocious, northeast regional director for the Office of Child, Youth and Families in the Department of Public Welfare.

But Pocious stressed that even when there was just bruising, the state still had evidence that abuse had occurred, and Cornell fired the approximately 20 staff members involved in these incidents. Four New Morgan staff members were arrested, three have been charged and, of those, two have already been convicted, Cornell officials said.

Even for a facility as large as New Morgan, Allegheny County's Rieland said, "This is unheard of to have that many allegations ... in any program."

In the five weeks since New Morgan notified officials it was going to close, the teens have been sent back to their home counties in what Pocious described as a smooth transition. The last resident left New Morgan Monday.

One of those returning to Shuman Juvenile Detention Center in Lincoln-Lemington was Patricia Domain, 19, who was featured in a Post-Gazette series last year about mentally troubled teens who are trapped in the juvenile justice system.

Domain's mother, Sylvia Forshey of Spring Garden, said her daughter continued to suffer from hallucinations. Domain's original offense was a simple assault but, because she ran away from placements, she eventually ended up in maximum security at the Danville Center for Adolescent Females in Montour County.

She was released in December to live with her mother. But by summer, Domain had been sent to New Morgan for repeatedly violating her court-ordered curfew. She did not report experiencing any trouble there, but now she's back at Shuman, awaiting her next placement. Forshey said her daughter's probation officer said she may be sent to a facility in Ohio.

"Patty doesn't look too healthy. She hasn't been eating," said Forshey.

As they relinquished New Morgan's license, Cornell officials acknowledged there were too many abuse incidents.

"Those are bad numbers. We're not backing off from that," said Bill Cammarata, who is director of operations for Cornell's eastern region. "The toughest part is that the program at New Morgan has improved dramatically over the last six to nine months, and the number of incidents has gone down. But it was a cumulative thing."

When New Morgan opened, it overestimated how many qualified workers it could find, and underestimated how much statewide demand there would be for a program like theirs, said Jack Godlesky, Cornell's eastern region vice president. That left them unable to handle the large number of troubled teens coming to their facility.

"These kids almost need one-on-one attention during most of the day," Godlesky said. "If we had it to do over, I think we would have taken it slower."

The financial difficulties stemmed from the state's reluctance to grant Cornell, or any other center, designation as a secure residential treatment facility -- a locked facility focused on behavioral health treatment. State officials at the time said such facilities as New Morgan were too much like jails and not enough like treatment centers to get the designation.

Without the designation, counties could not seek Medicaid reimbursement to offset the $260 to $280 per day cost to house each youth. Because of the cost, Philadelphia -- which at one point accounted for nearly half the 200 residents there -- stopped sending teens to New Morgan in January.

But the larger and ultimately unconquerable problem proved to be filling out its staff with people who would not end up abusing residents.

At its peak, New Morgan employed more than 300 staff, most of them "wonderful, caring people," Cammarata said.

But, Godlesky added: "We had great difficulty recruiting a sufficient number of staff, and the appropriate quality of staff. We did a lot of training. We did a lot of marketing. But, collectively, it just wasn't enough."

Cornell intended the new 214-bed facility to fill a statewide need for mental health treatment in a secure setting, which had been in short supply since the state closed the adolescent units in state mental hospitals in the mid-1990s. While some private, community-based group homes had taken some of these troubled teens, others believed they could not safely care for aggressive, mentally ill youths.

Within a month after it opened, New Morgan had a waiting list of teens that county officials wanted to send there.

The staffing problems persisted, though, despite raising starting salaries "several times," Godlesky said. And those problems went all the way to the top -- in its two years of operation, New Morgan went through three directors and a turnover of its entire senior staff.

The closure, said Cammarata, "broke my heart, because I don't know what's going to happen" to the residents. He said no decision had been made about what to do with the 10-acre rural campus located south of Reading.

New Morgan, Rieland added, "grew too fast, with too many difficult kids and too many inexperienced staff, and it was a recipe for disaster. The clear lesson is that [such a facility] has to be a small program, without a lot of interaction with other kids with other problems."

A week after Cornell relinquished its license to operate New Morgan, the state Department of Public Welfare issued a general authorization for state funding of secure residential treatment facilities.

Now court officials will wait to see if anyone takes the state up on its offer.

Based on informal conversations he's had with residential treatment facility operators, "Most of them are not interested," said Rieland. Treating mentally disturbed teens with histories of aggression, running away or setting fires, he said, "is not their niche, or their expertise, and they're not going to jump into it."

Part of their reluctance may be local zoning ordinances, which sometimes prohibit the fences and locked doors that would be necessary. But just as important is the financial equation, Rieland said, because these teens require high numbers of highly qualified staff.

"The facility needs to be small, but at what number of beds can we break even, enough for it to be attractive to providers?"

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