

## **Uncertified drug treatment produces nightmare complaints**

*Wednesday, August 13, 2008 DAVE PARKS News staff writer*

Mental health officials are strengthening oversight of Alabama's uncertified drug treatment programs after hearing "nightmare" stories about predatory practices and medical incompetence occurring in faith-based facilities housing thousands of drug-court defendants and prison parolees.

"We're not taking this lightly," said John Ziegler, a spokesman for the state Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. "It's critical."

Ziegler said the department plans to inspect more than 100 halfway houses, many of them operating under ministries that are accepting referrals from courts and prisons while claiming to provide drug treatment services.

Most of the facilities appear to lack certification for drug treatment, something that is required by law, Ziegler said. He said the state is willing to help programs achieve certification, but is unwilling to let them operate indefinitely without certification, which requires providing residents with medically accepted treatment services, not just prayer services.

The subject is expected to be discussed at a meeting Wednesday of state officials, drug treatment providers and consumer advocates.

Scores of addiction treatment programs have sprung up in Alabama in recent years to handle referrals from drug courts and parolees being released from crowded jails and prisons. Many of these people have mental illnesses accompanied by drug dependency, and are ordered to complete addiction treatment programs in lieu of criminal conviction or incarceration.

Couple that with Gov. Bob Riley's call for faith-based action in dealing with community problems, and the result has been a proliferation of ministries aimed at addiction recovery for people in trouble with the law.

"It's a nightmare ... and that's a kind way of putting it," said T. Michael McLemore, who heads a north Alabama chapter of Alabama Voices for Recovery, a consumer advocacy group. "These people are being ordered into treatment, and none is being offered."

`They're not qualified':

Complaints about faith-based, uncertified drug treatment centers pour into his Eva office daily, he said. His organization has counted 112 uncertified drug treatment programs operating in Alabama, housing about 5,000 residents. He reported the problem to the state Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, but the situation is complicated because so many other government agencies are feeding residents into these uncertified programs.

"It's being condoned by the Department of Corrections; it's being condoned by Pardons and Paroles; it's being condoned by community corrections," he said. "It's being condoned by everybody."

McLemore said it is certainly appropriate for ministries to get involved in community affairs, but government officials should not give them tacit approval to operate medical programs without certification or credentials.

"I'm not saying their intent is not good, but they're not qualified to treat dependency issues," he said.

The system is open to abuse because there are no standards for what constitutes a "faith-based" drug program. Anybody can call himself a minister, create his own method of addiction treatment and hold the power to send people back to prison or to face criminal charges.

Some use that power to shake down residents and their families, McLemore said. "It's a money-making machine."

Recently, he took a group of families and consumers to tell their stories to officials at the state Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. Afterward, officials decided to act on the problem, according to minutes from a July 9 meeting of the state's Substance Abuse Coordinating Subcommittee.

One parent's story:

One of the consumers making the trip was Glenda Lockhart of Falkville, whose 22-year-old son, Patrick Holloway, has had numerous run-ins with the law for breaking and entering, theft and drug violations.

Lockhart said her son has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder accompanied by schizophrenia. He has been in and out of four halfway houses offering uncertified drug treatment.

None of the programs had qualified medical personnel or counselors to handle her son's problems, but the last program, one called The Bridge Inc. in Double Springs, was the worst, Lockhart said. The Double Springs halfway house is not affiliated with a well-known, respected and certified drug treatment program by the same name in Gadsden.

In March, shortly after her son was ordered into The Bridge in Double Springs by a court officer in Guntersville, Lockhart got a call from the facility asking her to come in for a talk.

Lockhart said she was told that her son had violated a rule by smoking after hours, and he would be discharged and sent to jail unless she paid a hefty fine. "So I wrote a \$500 check," she said.

Then, Lockhart said, she got a similar call a week later, and this time the fine jumped to \$1,000. "Then it was \$1,500," she said. "The next time was \$2,000."

In all, she paid The Bridge more than \$18,000 over three months, and her son ended up getting expelled after she refused to pay any more money, she said. "They kicked him out for being late to chapel."

Lockhart provided copies of eight checks made out to The Bridge between March 7 and May 28, totaling \$11,700. Two of the checks had "donation" written as a memo. She also provided copies of two checks, each written for \$2,000 in cash, during the same period of time. She said that money was paid to The Bridge, too.

Lockhart said she got to know other residents at The Bridge, and learned that many were recruited from jails and prisons under the condition that they would have to get a job and turn over portions of checks to cover living expenses and drug treatment, a common practice in halfway houses.

After they arrived, the halfway house controlled where they worked and how much they were allowed to keep from their checks, Lockhart said. They had to abide by whatever rules The Bridge set, or end up back in prison or before a judge.

"They were using these guys as slave labor, here in the great state of Alabama," Lockhart said.

While at The Bridge, she said, her son was taken off his psychiatric medications and was told God would heal him. He went wild and got into more trouble with the law, she said.

"This needs to be stopped," Lockhart said.

In addition to losing thousands of dollars, her son has never received the treatment that he desperately needs, she said.

"I could have cared less about the money," she said. "My job was to try to save Patrick's life."

Defending The Bridge:

Jeremy Turner, office manager at The Bridge, denied any wrongdoing.

"Anybody who would try to accuse us of anything like that is wrong," he said. "We do charge people money, because that's really the only way we can keep our doors open. We've had to let our program director go recently because of lack of funds."

Turner acknowledged there have been problems. "Our program is going through a lot of drastic changes lately," he said.

The executive director recently resigned, and other workers either quit or had to be let go. There were two licensed counselors, but now there are none, he said.

The halfway house can hold 50 residents, but there are about 30 remaining. They attend chapel services and listen to Christian speakers who come in to talk about recovery, Turner said.

Chris Lee, program director at The Bridge, said he was aware of Lockhart's complaints. "Lovely lady as far as I know, but her opinion is not exactly our opinion," he said. "I don't think I can legally respond. I'm just learning about some of these things myself. This comes from a previous regime."