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ISSUE BRIEFING UPDATE

Follow up on Out-of-State Residential Facility: Bledsoe Youth Academy

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INTRODUCTION

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) was contacted by numerous key stakeholders after releasing the Issue Briefing, *Concerns for Out-of-State Residential Facility: Bledsoe Youth Academy*.¹ There were requests from State Senators and Representatives to discuss language for potential bills to ensure all children in residential placements are safe and provided the adequate care they deserve. There was outreach from Executive Councilors sharing their concern, asking questions, and seeking solutions. Advocates across New Hampshire thanked the OCA for highlighting the concerns and offered support for system reform. As the media covered the story and received responses from the public, they inquired about ways in which New Hampshire constituents could support these and other children in residential care. Although the OCA report brought to light the horrendous situation these kids had endured, this is just the beginning of the critical work to ensure the safety and best interest of all New Hampshire children residing in residential facilities.

The reality of uncovering an abusive placement is not as cut and dry as pointing out its dysfunction and retrieving the kids from that facility. Above all, it is honoring the experience of those who survived the day-to-day life of humiliation, fear, degradation, and who fought for their survival. At its core, trauma recovery remains multi-faceted and cannot just be about the individual. The power lies in the realization that healing and fundamental rehabilitation are a much broader ask when a system is exposed, and those who trusted in its genuine compassion are shaken to their core. A harsh reality is that we must, at times, question those entrusted with the care of vulnerable children. This is the experience after the OCA unveiled the maltreatment of two New Hampshire kids (NH kids), although the concerns for the dozens of children left there remains.

FORMER EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

On August 10th, 2023, the Office of the Child Advocate received an email from a former Bledsoe employee. They stated they learned about the OCA report in the Tennessee media, and wanted to share their experience working for Bledsoe Youth Academy. The Child Advocate responded, requesting more information to learn what the former employee had observed, and why they resigned. They reported to have worked at the facility for a short time, ending in June 2023. This individual was hired as a therapist, and before working at Bledsoe Youth Academy, had experience working as such in the community. They noted the report resonated with them, as it was very similar to what they observed while working at Bledsoe, which ultimately led to them resigning. All levels of staff at the program were described as “out of the realm of any professionalism.” It was stated that staff would boast about “coming from the prison environment.” Throughout the conversation, the former employee recalled multiple incidents where staff berated the children, were both verbally and physically aggressive towards the children, and consistently provided harsh punishment for even minor missteps. They shared that this was observed as early as their first day working at the facility, and although it was immediately reported to the Clinical Director and Executive Director, the concerns were not resolved because “not one department is unaffected by the culture, it is systemic.” During the conversation, the former employee shared their report to HR in a recent exit interview in which they stated the parent company, Youth Opportunity Investment, “need[s] to gut the whole place and start with people that are professional.” When asked why they felt they needed to speak up about what was witnessed, the response was “I am really concerned for those children,” and the

¹ <https://www.childadvocate.nh.gov/documents/reports/OCA-Bledsoe-Issue-Briefing.pdf>

states that continue to place their children there need to know to “go get your kids today!” The most shocking statement by this former employee was one the Advocates felt to be true, having voiced concerns to Bledsoe Youth Academy leadership and being met with utter indifference: “The staff have the mentality that ‘you are all here for help and no one will believe you over us.’”

In wanting to further explore the culture of the staff at Bledsoe, the OCA collected a multitude of reviews from past employees of both this facility, as well as others run by Youth Opportunity Investments. According to an Indeed review from a former Clinical Assistant posted online in May of 2023, a consistent lack of support, forced overtime, chronic understaffing and inappropriate supervisors were among the issues experienced while employed: “The administration culture is to bully both the children and staff...Leadership was far more concerned with the money they make off the children rather than the safety/well-being of the other children and staff...Unfortunately, trauma-based care is not a priority, and the bad outweighed the good.”² A former Youth Specialist left a review in April of 2023 stating, “The staff did not care about these children. They would make fun of them, cuss at them, let them do what they wanted, and let them watch and listen to inappropriate content.”³ The resounding feel of the online feedback was that this was not a healthy work nor treatment environment for the kids placed there.

RETURN TO NH

On August 14th, 2023, the NH kids that were placed at Bledsoe Youth Academy returned to the Granite State. They were initially placed in emergency beds, which are short term placements. Within days, they were transitioned to different residential programs in New Hampshire. Upon learning of their return, the Advocates immediately contacted their new placement programs to set up in-person meetings with them.

THE VISITS

On August 18th and August 21st, the Advocates met with the kids, separately, in their new placements. It was noted that neither had seen nor talked with the other since their arrival back in New Hampshire, nor had they debriefed with their assigned state workers.

Observations

Upon arriving to the new placement for one kid, the Advocates were met with trees, water, and a gravel driveway. They pulled up to what appeared to be cottage-like offices. There were home-like dorms in the distance, and kids gathering for activities on the lawn. This was a stark contrast from the locked, black chain link fences the Advocates were met with at Bledsoe. While the Advocates waited for the boy, they couldn’t help but think back to the last time they saw him. A month ago, he was in a solid-colored jumpsuit, cleaning his way throughout a sad and dejected facility. On this day, though, the visual difference was profound. The Advocates were met with a smile, and he was dressed head to toe in clean, youth-appropriate, and individually chosen attire. He smiled and said, “it is so much better here.”

The placement for the other NH kid, although not as rural, was equally as welcoming. Upon pulling into the driveway, the Advocates observed a small administrative building, an outside area where kids were

² <https://www.indeed.com/cmp/Youth-Opportunity-Investments,-LLC/reviews?fjobtitle=Clinical+Assistant&fcountry=US>

³ <https://www.indeed.com/cmp/Youth-Opportunity-Investments,-LLC/reviews?fjobtitle=Youth+Specialist&fcountry=US>

seen relaxing, playing, and interacting with staff, and a larger dorm-style building. The staff were incredibly welcoming and kind. A staff working directly with him met first with the Advocates. They said that they were happy to welcome him and noted there had been a lot shared with the clinical staff about what he experienced at Bledsoe, so they are working to support him in processing the trauma. This staff further explained that he has been through a lot of transition and may not be up for additional visitors, but the OCA is welcome to return any time. Soon after this conversation, the boy arrived. He too was dressed in his own clothing, happy to see the Advocates, and noted how grateful he was to be back in New Hampshire.

Meetings with Kids

In two separate conversations with the NH kids, previously placed at Bledsoe Youth Academy, the Advocates gathered a list of additional concerns. Some of these concerns the boys felt they were not able to initially share out of fear of retaliation while remaining in the facility. They also opened up about the realities of what they experienced in the 30 days after New Hampshire notified Bledsoe Youth Academy of the OCA's concerns, prior to their return to NH. During these follow-up conversations, the Advocates learned:

There is a significant lack of ethical treatment and boundaries by direct care staff.

- Both shared that there is a female staff member in her early 20s who is openly in a relationship with a peer in the program. That young man told the NH kids that “she is mine” and that they are “official.” The boys said that this relationship between the adult staff member and kid in their care was openly acknowledged.
- A physical relationship that occurred between two kids at the program was publicly mocked by staff, and the individuals were shamed and demoralized. One New Hampshire boy shared that when staff found out about the relationship between these two kids, they put the entire facility in a week-long lockdown. Both kids were grateful to have left during this time, but admitted being worried about what had transpired with their peers who were left behind since they had left Tennessee.
- It was reported to the Advocates that the staff at Bledsoe would have the kids watch inappropriate movies, described by one kid as pornographic, which made the kids feel uncomfortable.

The facility operates on a culture of fear and humiliation.

- The kids reported that media was outside of the facility and staff were talking openly about how the NH kids had “snitched.” It was shared with the Advocates that one of them overheard Bledsoe staff incentivizing their peers to “jump” the boys after the report regarding Bledsoe was made public. One kid reported he “had to take a lot of heat” from staff and kids for disclosing.
- Both kids disclosed to the Advocates that they were threatened by staff at Bledsoe for speaking to the OCA and their DCYF workers. One explained that the staff knew they met with the Advocates together, so they separated them and threatened to beat them up if they did not tell them which one of them spoke of the concerns with staff behavior. The older of the two boys went on to share that he was worried about the younger kid from New Hampshire, so he chose to take the blame. He stated “...[he] is smaller and cannot fight. I told him, ‘Say it was all me, I can figure my way around it...just

say it was me and I did the talking.” In describing this, you could see the child’s eyes become slightly teary as he described the other, younger kid and how he was not able to navigate the culture as easily, which made him much more vulnerable to harm by Bledsoe staff. The older kid went on to say, “I told him that to keep him safe.” When asking the older kid how he kept himself safe, he went on to describe that he did his best to avoid specific staff and was highly aware of his surroundings and conversations between staff and his peers in the program.

- One kid disclosed that he lied to staff about when he was leaving and where he would be going next, in an attempt to protect himself. He stated that staff started to make comments about calling other programs in the area and telling the staff and kids there that “a snitch is coming.” This boy continued by stating that staff threatened that he would be beat up upon arrival at any new facility, because they called the programs to ask staff and kids to beat him up and take his food. He noted that staff said “You gonna get it.” Both kids were ridiculed and threatened with physical harm for sharing their experience with the OCA and DCYF.
- One of the boys disclosed that, two days prior to leaving Bledsoe, someone shut off the light when he was in the bathroom and entered the stall he was in, strategically where the cameras cannot see. He stated, “I couldn’t see anything. He was swinging, so I started swinging. I hit the wall, the toilet, I don’t know, I couldn’t see.” When one of the Advocates inquired as to what stopped the altercation, he said, “I heard, ‘alright.’” When met with confusion, he shared that this is a term used when a group of peers are looking out for staff, and it is time for a fight to stop. He further explained that this is referred to as “getting into a 30” because kids will watch out for staff while another beats up a peer for 30 seconds. When staff acknowledged this fight, they told the NH kid that since he was involved in a “30,” that he would be written up and no one would believe him anymore. Meaning that no one would believe the disclosures he made about Bledsoe, specifically, his DCYF workers. The Advocates observed cuts still visible on his hands, and he confirmed they were from this incident. When asked if he was further injured, he disclosed getting hit hard in the head and abdomen, but no medical follow-up was provided by Bledsoe.
- The other boy disclosed that he was doing laundry at Bledsoe and was in an area where the camera angles do not capture. He went on to say that a strong male staff, that had been taunting him for the past few weeks, walked by and “shoulder checked me into the wall.” This incident not only hurt, but also scared him that this could have led to further violence. At this time the NH kid did not know a transition was imminent.

Staff attitudes reflect a punitive/detention culture.

- The culture both boys described is one widely known for its gang affiliations. They said that many staff either went to jail, came from working at a prison, or both. Both boys could easily identify the gangs that Bledsoe staff members were affiliated with, along with slang terms staff used to describe themselves. These terms were also used to scare all kids in the program into compliance.
- The boys shared with the Advocates that, along with the staff, the Executive Director herself incentivized kid-on-kid violence. When asking one of the kids how he knew this, he shared that she approached him to physically attack a peer, assuring him that “I would not get reprimanded”, if he complied. He stated that he did not follow through with the ask. This boy went on to explain that he

did not feel safe sharing that information with the Advocates when they visited the facility, out of fear of retaliation directly from her.

- The boys stated that certain staff reacted excessively, to minor missteps, or perceived “attitude.” This echoed the statement made to the OCA from the former Bledsoe staff. One boy gave the example of staff asking what the kids are looking at if perhaps they stare for even a second too long. He said that the staff would grab their arms, and if a kid reacted or resisted the grab, it would lead to an excessively aggressive restraint.
- One kid was required to quit his job. When he returned to the program after quitting, he was asked by the Executive Director to hand over the cash he had on him from work. He shared that she told him, “You made me work fifteen extra minutes, so I am keeping this money.” Additionally, the Executive Director managed and physically maintained the debit card he was issued to receive direct deposit payments from his job. He explained that the card could only be accessed by the Executive Director because the account was registered to her email address and a password of her choosing. He told the Advocates that although he had asked for the card and his cash before leaving the program, he did not get either, despite having remaining funds that he had earned.
- The other child shared that he was removed from his bedroom and made to sleep in the hallway after the OCA visit in July. With further questioning, the Advocates uncovered that prior to speaking up, he was in a bunk room, but post-disclosure staff had him sleeping on a mattress in the hallway, which he perceived as punishment.
- After learning that he was returning to New Hampshire the next day, one boy reported that he felt such joy inside that he could not stop smiling. A Bledsoe staff saw him smiling and said, “quit playing with me – you get a zero,” meaning he got zero points for the day. The staff member proceeded to take papers the boy had in his hands and ripped them up and kicked his books that were on a shelf which knocked them all over.

The facility fails to provide the necessary therapeutic milieu and medical care.

- One child shared “there is not a single thing I benefitted from that program.” He went on to speak about the lack of therapeutic progress made while at Bledsoe and referred to programs in New Hampshire where he received adequate treatment. A clinician who previously worked with this boy shared that he appears to disassociate while talking about Bledsoe, which was also observed by the Advocates. When talking with the Advocates he also became tearful, and then angry when discussing Bledsoe. He finished with, “No kid should ever be sent to Bledsoe.”
- When describing how they are feeling after this experience, one boy explained that Bledsoe made him so “institutionalized,” and it has made him struggle in many ways since he left. He gave the simple example, “when I got home it felt so weird to wear my own clothes.”
- The other NH kid shared that his experience at Bledsoe has left him “skittish.” Although he recognizes that he is now in a safe place, he cannot stop feeling on edge. He provided the example that he asks to do everything first, such as to get water or go to the bathroom, and the staff at his current placement warmly reply, “you do not have to ask for that.”

The boys went on to share with the Advocates that even though they are now safely removed from Bledsoe, they are still concerned for the other kids there. They disclosed that there are many other kids there who are struggling greatly because of the degrading and aggressive treatment by the staff.

IMMEDIATE ACTION STEPS

After meeting with the kids, the OCA immediately alerted the New Hampshire Department for Children Youth & Families (DCYF), Tennessee Child Protective Services, as well as Tennessee Licensing of the additional disclosures made by the boys.

The Advocates later learned that Tennessee Child Protective Services has already closed out their investigation. It was explained that under their statute, they cannot make a finding if there is no single incident reported with a specific staff member as the alleged perpetrator and a specific kid as the victim. The assigned Tennessee Child Protection worker noted that all concerns shared by the Advocates are saved in the case record and would be available to review in the future if a “specific” incident is reported.

On August 24th, 2023, the OCA attended a virtual meeting with Tennessee Licensing to describe the additional disclosures made by the NH kids. During this meeting, the Child Advocate shared that Tennessee Child Protection is no longer investigating and inquired about the status of the licensing investigation. They shared that they are still actively investigating the facility and asked to be informed of any additional information gathered, including names of specific staff members. During this discussion, the OCA received confirmation that the fire sprinkler incident occurred in January of 2023, and the facility has been under construction since that time. It was noted that they are being followed closely by the State Fire Marshall, as their fire certification has been overdue for an extended period of time.

The OCA has also had multiple follow up meetings and conversations with New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Bureau of Children’s Behavioral Health (BCBH), and the Division for Children Youth and Families (DCYF). DHHS has asked the OCA to collaborate on many of the recommendations made in the report. These meetings will be frequent and ongoing to improve policies and practices to ensure the safety of New Hampshire children in all residential placements.

CONCLUSION

The OCA’s worst fears were confirmed, in that, there was further physical and emotional harm to these children after bravely disclosing the maltreatment they experienced while at Bledsoe Youth Academy. These kids were tormented for truthfully sharing their lived experiences as evidenced by the totality of their disclosures – the feeling of one child needing to protect another from harm; the planned assaults, verbal threats, staffs’ menacing behavior; and the retaliation that was threatened to follow them to the perceived next placement. Given what the OCA has learned, it is without question that NO child should remain in the care of Bledsoe Youth Academy. It is also imperative that certification and oversight of New Hampshire children must be more closely managed. As was highlighted in last month’s report, the State of New Hampshire has made many positive strides in the last several years with the creation of a Children’s System of Care, recognizing the importance of trauma-informed treatment, and holding Granite State programs to a higher standard of practice. However, the recent trauma these already vulnerable kids have endured outside of our borders tells us there is much more that demands to be done on a systemic level to protect New Hampshire children.