

May 27, 2008

The Honorable George Miller  
Chairman  
House Committee on Education and Labor  
2181 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Miller,

The Alliance for the Safe, Therapeutic, and Appropriate Use of Residential Treatment (A START) would like to express its strong support for H.R. 5876, the “Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act of 2008.” A START is a group of mental health professionals, advocates, young adults who have been in residential programs, and parents of young people who have been in such programs. We came together as a group about four years ago out of our concern about the problem of abuse and neglect in private residential programs for youth, and we have continued our research, education, and advocacy efforts on this issue since.

Since we came together, we have been trying to get precise data on the number of young people in America who are in private residential programs, whether such programs be called wilderness camps, therapeutic boarding schools, boot camps, behavior modification facilities, or residential treatment programs. We have found that because a number of states do not require all programs of this type to be licensed or to report any data, it is not possible to gather precise data on such basic things as the number of programs, the number of children served, the number of cases of reported abuse, or even the number of children who have died in such programs. Yet the absence of precise data should not prevent us from acting at this time. Some of our research, reported by A START member Allison Pinto, Ph.D., at the October, 2007 hearings, the findings from the GAO studies, and information we have received from parents and young people around the country, have convinced us that the problem is of sufficient scope to require immediate action, and that it would be a mistake to delay action until precise data are obtained.

The information we have received about the lack of consistent licensing and monitoring in many states, and about young people being transported from their homes in one state to programs hundreds if not thousands of miles away in different states, about programs shifting locations from one state to another, and about programs operating in multiple states, has convinced us that federal action is needed to protect the safety and well-being of young people. We are therefore very pleased that H.R. 5876 proposes national standards for private residential programs, and includes appropriate monitoring and regulation. It is our hope that all states will respond to this serious problem by enacting appropriate state legislation and monitoring procedures but given the current lack of such laws and procedures, it is essential that the federal government play a strong role.

We have heard many parents describe deceptive marketing procedures in which they are given assurances and promises about the qualifications of staff and the type of treatment that is offered which are just not accurate. We have heard many complaints about basic rights of young people being violated, and excessive force being used. We have heard parents tell us of how they have made inquiries because of concern about their child, only to have program staff or educational consultants exploit this concern and tell them that immediate placement is essential. We are delighted that your hearings have focused on deceptive marketing practices, and that H.R. 5876 requires programs to disclose to parents information about current staff, and about substantiated reports of child abuse.

We are appalled and outraged at the way young people and their parents have been treated by many of these programs, and we thank you for your leadership on this basic human rights issue. We look forward to the successful passage of H.R. 5876, and to better days ahead in which children and families are able to receive the support and assistance they deserve in their own communities from well-trained, responsible professionals.

Sincerely,

Robert M. Friedman, Ph.D.  
Professor and A START Coordinator