



A L L I A N C E F O R T H E

# Safe, Therapeutic & Appropriate Use of Residential Treatment

The Alliance for the Safe, Therapeutic and Appropriate use of Residential Treatment (A START) believes that residential programs serving children with special mental health challenges should be properly licensed and monitored by state government, and accredited by independent accrediting organizations. A START is co-sponsored by the Department of Child and Family Studies of the University of South Florida.



Honorable Members of Congress  
United States House of Representatives and United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Members of Congress,

As youth leaders who have spoken out on policy issues regarding youth services, we are pleased to add our voices to those of professionals and parents expressing concern regarding unlicensed and unregulated residential programs for youth in need. We are the ones who understand best how bad care can harm youth. We are the ones who have lived and continue to live with the repercussions of such care. Some of us know youth sent to good programs that have experienced positive outcomes as a result of the care they received. Many of us either know youth who have been severely harmed by facilities from which there was no escape and in which there was no access to relief from inappropriate and abusive care, or have been in these facilities ourselves. We feel this is unacceptable. Youth have a right to treatment by qualified mental health professionals in their own community and have the safeguards in place to ensure they are being treated with respect and dignity.

As youth who have benefited from community based programs that work to empower youth through nurturing within their own communities, we know that there are alternatives to sending youth away to special schools. Community based programs empower youth by focusing on their strengths and by teaching them how to be functioning members of the community they live in. Special schools and residential programs treat them in an isolated environment, and then try to put them back into the community they were removed from, frequently with very little long term success.

We have seen that over the last fifteen years many new unlicensed, privately run residential programs for youth with mental and emotional disorders have been established. With no access to outside advocates and no real system of accountability in place, these facilities are free to advertise as institutions that treat a range of issues, from serious mental illnesses like bipolar and depression, to anorexia and sexual abuse. Often these facilities do not provide students with qualified, experienced staff trained to handle such complex issues. Youth are severely punished for their negative actions or behaviors rather than being shown their strengths and taught how to build on them, at home, in their familial environment. At this moment, these conditions are producing life-altering negative effects. Many facilities resort to forced labor and exercise, seclusion, and physiological stressors in place to induce change, which often exacerbates youth's problems.

As a consequence of this harsh, stressful treatment, a number of youth leave such facilities only to find that they are plagued by nightmares and suffer from post traumatic stress disorder and anxiety which make life outside the facility even more difficult than before. Our fear is that many parents, frustrated over inadequate community based care, will fall prey to

**To learn more about A START, please contact Robert Friedman, Ph.D. 813-974-4671 • [friedman@fmhi.usf.edu](mailto:friedman@fmhi.usf.edu)**

these programs. From our parents, professional partners, and those youth who have experienced such programs, we have learned about the following horrific conditions that exist in these “special” institutions:

- Youth are often prohibited from speaking with their own families for up to six months- a practice which has significant negative consequences for child and parent relationships.
- Seclusion and restraint procedures are significantly more restrictive than what is generally accepted by mental health licensing and accrediting bodies. These practices have resulted in several documented deaths.
- Even though the needs of the youth in these facilities are great, unqualified staff are charged with implementing treatment plans and supervising the youth.
- The educational services provided to the youth often fail to meet even minimum standards.
- There is a pervasive use of excessive exercise, labor and other physiological stressors to induce change.
- No research has demonstrated that these programs have long-term benefits.

Even more alarming is that abuse and negligence are all too common within these facilities. There have been many highly publicized accounts of atrocious sexual and physical abuse, as well as medical neglect. However, there is still little to no public oversight, leaving already emotionally fragile young people even more vulnerable. Yet it appears that no one but us youth who have experienced such low-grade care, or those who are close to youth who have been in such care, are aware of what is taking place. Because these programs continue to operate virtually unregulated and unmonitored, there is the appearance that both the government and the public find such treatment acceptable, making it difficult for youth suffering in these facilities to feel comfortable speaking out. Damage to the mental health of our youth is being done, and there is little in place to limit or control it.

Alternatives have been developed to meet the needs of youth; however, options that work better and cost less are frequently unavailable. As the Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health reported in 1999, “the most convincing evidence of effectiveness is for home-based services and therapeutic foster care.” A new movement of consumers and their youth allies were at the Surgeon General’s 2000 Conference on Children’s Mental Health asking that the adults running our systems of care listen to youth, for we are an invaluable source of direct information on difficult issues such as those surrounding therapeutic boarding schools and emotional growth programs. We are the sounding boards of our lives. The emerging youth movement in the United States strongly supports a comprehensive system of care that would dramatically reduce the number of youth in these facilities. Youth could be served in their own communities, at a significantly reduced cost. We know that some parents, trying their best to help their troubled children, are often financially strained to afford mental health programs. Debt and spent resources inevitably will decrease their ability to help their youth once they are home. We feel that the federal government, many states and many parents are wasting money on harmful programs. We have seen the damage from these programs and have lived with it. It is real and long-lasting.

Specifically, we urge lawmakers to enact the following proposals that would support the call from President Bush’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health to “swiftly eliminate unnecessary and inappropriate institutionalization” and that would make the use of therapeutic boarding schools both safe and rare:

- End Institutionalized Abuse Against Children Act of 2005 (H.R. 1738)
- The Keeping Families Together Act (S. 1704, H.R. 3243)

Too little information is known about the extent of these problems and abuses, and yet what is known is the cause of great concern. As youth advocating for our own well being as well as that of all our brothers, sisters and friends experiencing troubles, we know that, at best, many of these programs do not meet the needs of most youth and, at worst, they abuse the youth for which we have the most concern. Today, we join with others in calling on the General Accounting Office to conduct a study into the issue of children housed in unlicensed therapeutic boarding schools, and the conditions that they are required to endure, so that the full extent of the problems in these facilities can be understood.