

Bay City News



Oct 25, 2007 - BCN84:CONTRA COSTA CO.: INCOMPETENCE ALLEGED IN STATE SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROGRAMS

BCN84 -JUSTIN FOUNDATION REPORT

By Bay City News Service

After her son died in a drug treatment program seven years ago, Danville resident Cathie Smith began investigating other reports of patient deaths and alleged incompetence inside California's substance abuse treatment facilities.

Smith is the founder of the non-profit Justin Foundation, named for her son, which released a report today alleging that inadequate regulation of drug treatment facilities has allowed "untrained, unskilled and unethical counselors to jeopardize lives, health and recovery" of patients in substance abuse programs in California.

The foundation looked at investigations into 67 deaths that occurred at treatment facilities between 2000 and 2006. The Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs, which oversees the state's substance abuse treatment, conducted the investigations and, according to the Justin Foundation report, found staff failures in 27 of the cases.

The report admits, however, that not all of the staff failures caused the patients' deaths. But investigators did find that in some cases staff members ignored patients' suicidal warning signs, failed to adequately supervise patients and failed to sufficiently guard against relapse, according to the report.

In a press conference held on the steps of the Contra Costa County courthouse in Martinez today, Assembly Member Mark DeSaulnier said the state's licensing standards for drug treatment programs are among the lowest in the nation.

According to Bob Tyler, president of the California Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors, the national standard for licensed drug treatment counselors is three years of experience and 270 hours of education. Counselors in California, however, are only required to have one year of experience and 155 hours of education to be licensed.

By 2010, only 30 percent of counselors at state licensed drug and alcohol treatment programs will be required to be licensed, Tyler said.

Meanwhile, private drug treatment counselors are not required to be licensed at all, according to Smith.

DeSaulnier has introduced a bill, Assembly Bill 1367, which would establish voluntary licensure for private practice substance abuse treatment counselors. He said while he didn't think the bill went far enough, it was a start.

Any substance abuse treatment facility that houses people overnight or receives state money, however, is currently required to be licensed.

According to DeSaulnier, an estimated 200,000 Californians enter drug or alcohol treatment programs each year and one out of every nine

residents are substance abusers.

An estimated 80 percent of state prisoners have substance abuse problems, DeSaulnier said, and some estimates claim that substance abuse costs the state about \$33 billion a year.

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