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In God's name

## State reviews unlicensed homes

A Times series exposed abuse, neglect and illegal placement of kids.

**BY ALEXANDRA ZAYAS**

*Times Staff Writer*

Child care workers have violated Florida law by sending foster children to unlicensed religious homes, a Tampa Bay Times investigation has found.

The Times discovered at least four state children living this year in three separate unlicensed religious homes. Two homes told the Times about the transfers. The third published information about the children in its newsletter.

Department of Children and Families officials are investigating how the transfers occurred.

"It's a mistake," said DCF spokeswoman Erin Gillespie. "We're owning up to it. Everyone's owning up to it."

Teen Challenge Vero Beach, also known as Anderson Academy, is among the unlicensed programs that took in foster children.

The reform home for boys was once accredited under Florida's religious exemption, but now operates as a boarding school without any state-recognized accreditation.

In the past decade, DCF has investigated 20 allegations of abuse at the home, finding credible evidence in eight cases involving physical injury, medical neglect and "bizarre punishment."

The home's director, Maynard Sweigard, denies any abuse occurred, but says his program once used more aggressive disciplinary methods. The ranch no longer relies on "hands-on" tactics, Sweigard said.

Sweigard said more than half of the abuse allegations came from children who transferred in from state-licensed facilities.

"These kids were trained to ring a bell and get attention from the DCF," he said.

One allegation involved a boy sent from a state-licensed home who "feigned suicide," attempting to hang himself, Sweigard said.

"He didn't succeed," Sweigard said. "As soon as the words, 'I'm going to kill myself' came out of his mouth, he was stopped."

But the school did not immediately call police because the boy had a history of faking suicide attempts, Sweigard said.

"The next thing I know is there is a DCF investiga-



photos by KATHLEEN FLYNN | Times

The Southeastern Military Academy in Port St. Lucie requires strict adherence to rules. After losing its religious accreditation, it skirted oversight by registering as a boarding school.

tion and I'm being charged with abuse by neglect."

Prosecutors did not pursue the case.

In September, Sweigard told the Times that he had one child from the state and that his program has been paid more than once in the past to take children licensed homes could not handle.

"When you have a horse you can't train," Sweigard said, "you pay somebody that's better at it than you are. We always looked at it as a compliment."

Other unlicensed homes say they have received state-dependent children, as well. The director of another Teen Challenge program, Gateway Christian Military Academy in Bonifay, said an 18-year-old once in state care wound up at his facility.

Earlier in the year, the Times found two additional foster children placed in another home that had taken a religious exemption in lieu of a license. When the children were discovered, the home immediately applied for and received a state license.

After hearing of the boy at Teen Challenge Vero Beach, DCF sent a mass email warning providers of the misdemeanors and felonies they could face if they broke the law.

The boy was removed, Sweigard said.

DCF also called upon the inspector general to start a statewide investigation to identify how many other state children wound up in unlicensed care.

"We feel like we need an in-depth investigation from an external party to determine exactly what happened," Gillespie said. "How do we ensure this doesn't happen again and where these kids are now?"

Boys line up before a ceremony at Gateway Christian Military Academy, also known as Teen Challenge, in Bonifay. The DCF has investigated rough tactics.

