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A Times investigation | First of three parts

WHEN PARENTS TURN to “Christian” group homes for help with a troubled child, religion can be an excuse for abuse and secrecy. Teenagers have been shackled, beaten, hurt so badly they nearly died. The Bible offers cover for extreme discipline. Florida officials say they are powerless to stop it.

In God's name



THE FEAR OF GOD: A drill instructor escorts a young man in an orange jumpsuit at Gateway Christian Military Academy, also known as Teen Challenge, in Bonifay on Oct. 5. The jumpsuits single out newcomers — and rule breakers. Parents know this place is tough. It's why they choose it.

STORIES BY ALEXANDRA ZAYAS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHLEEN FLYNN • OF THE TIMES

When parents turn to “Christian” group homes for help with a troubled child, religion can be an excuse for abuse and secrecy. Teenagers have been shackled, beaten, hurt so badly they nearly died. The Bible offers cover for extreme discipline. Florida officials say they are powerless to stop it.

...

They shaved him bald that first morning in 2008, put him in an orange jumpsuit and made him exercise past dark.

Through the night, as he slept on the floor, they forced him awake for more.

The sun had not yet risen over the Christian military home when Samson Lehman collapsed for the sixth time. Still, he said, they made him run.

The screaming, the endless exercise, it was all in the name of God, a necessary step at the Gateway Christian Military Academy on the path to righteousness.

So when Samson vomited, they threw him a rag. When his urine turned red, they said that was normal.

By Day 3, the 15-year-old was on the verge of death, his dehydrated organs shutting down.

Slumped against a wall, cold and immobile, Lehman recalls men who recited Scripture calling him a wimp. And he thought: Maybe, if I die here, someone will shut this place down.

Not in Florida.

In this state, unlicensed religious homes can abuse children and go on operating for years. Almost 30 years ago, Florida legislators passed a law eliminating state oversight of children's homes that claim government rules hamper their religious practices.

Today, virtually anyone can claim a list of religious ideals, take in children and subject them to punishment and isolation that verge on torture - so long as they quote chapter and verse to justify it.

The Tampa Bay Times spent a year investigating more than 30 religious homes that have housed children in recent years across Florida. Some operate with a religious exemption, legally regulated by a private

Christian organization instead of the state. Others lost their exemption and operate with no legal accreditation at all.

Although most drew few complaints, nearly a dozen have been hounded by allegations of abuse. A review of thousands of pages of investigative files and interviews with dozens of former residents found:

- State authorities have responded to at least 165 allegations of abuse and neglect in the past decade, but homes have remained open even after the state found evidence of sex abuse and physical injury.

- The religious exemption has for decades allowed homes to avoid state restrictions on corporal punishment. Homes have pinned children to the ground for hours, confined them in seclusion for days, made them stand until they wet themselves and exercised them until they vomited.

- Children have been bruised, bloodied and choked to unconsciousness in the name of Christian discipline. A few barely escaped with their lives. In addition, in two settled lawsuits, a mother said her son was forced to hike on broken feet; a father said his son was handcuffed, bound at the feet, locked away for three days and struck by other boys at the instruction of the home.

- Adults have ordered children to participate in the punishment, requiring them to act as jailers, to bully troublemakers or to chase, tackle and sit on their peers.

- Teens have been denounced as sinners, called “faggots” and “whores,” and humiliated in front of their peers for menstrual stains and suspicions of masturbation.

- Parents share the blame. Some sign away their children for a year or more without first visiting a home or checking credentials. But state officials bear some responsibility because they have not warned the public about programs they believe are abusive.

- Florida taxpayers have supported some unlicensed homes with hundreds of thousands of dollars in McKay scholarships - a government program to help special needs students pay tuition at private schools.

In Florida, the vast majority of children’s homes are regulated and inspected by the state Department of Children and Families. But under Florida law, a home can shield itself from that oversight by claiming a religious exemption.

Instead of state-trained child safety workers, these homes are regulated by the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a private, nonprofit group run almost entirely by the same people who run the homes.

FACCCA executive director Buddy Morrow said his organization condemns extended isolation, humiliation and the shackling of children. He also said the association aggressively monitors homes for abusive practices, but he refused to provide copies of inspection reports and other documentation.

In response to the Times investigation, he expects his board will strengthen restrictions on corporal punishment, limit seclusion and ban shackling.

Morrow would not talk about specific homes, but he said his association has revoked or refused to renew accreditation for at least three homes since 2005. Some continued to operate - without a state license or a religious exemption - the Times found.



A SURVIVOR: Samson Lehman, with girlfriend Alayna Stitely at his side, plays a video game at his Gainesville home June 13. Lehman nearly died after extreme exercise at Gateway Academy.

At least four religious homes are accepting children without any legally recognized credentials. Foster children in state care have been illegally placed in at least two of those homes, the Times discovered.

In response, DCF officials have launched a state-wide review to identify rogue children’s homes and any state-dependent children who have been placed in them.

More must be done, says Robert Friedman, a psychologist and professor emeritus with the University of South Florida’s Department of Child and Family Studies. Friedman founded an advocacy group to stop abuse in residential facilities and has given congressional testimony on the topic.

“For us not to be able to regulate these programs,” he said, “for us not to be able to provide the oversight of these programs that’s needed is just shameful.

“We don’t know even the scope of the problem, and we allow these youngsters behind these closed doors.”

Religious homes

For years the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies has listed its primary address as 2603 SW Brim St., a three-bedroom house in Lake City.

The agency’s two full-time employees and two part-timers must process new applications and fan out across the state to monitor and investigate more than 20 Christian child care facilities.

Every year, association officials say, they check on the nearly 700 girls and boys whose parents have placed them in the homes. Many parents come to the homes in desperation, hoping religion or strict discipline can get their child off drugs or correct severe emotional problems.

“They’ve been through state-supported or state programs. None of the programs have worked for them,” said Doug Smith, a former board member who runs Safe Harbor Maritime Academy with his wife. “And for some of these children, this is a last resort.”

Parents who can afford it pay tuition that can reach \$20,000 a year or more. Some must take out loans, dip into college funds, or accept scholarships provided by the homes. In addition, the state has paid more than \$600,000 in McKay money to parents for use at FACCCA-accredited homes.

In Florida alone, unlicensed religious homes collected at least \$13 million in 2010, according to available IRS filings.

Most of the homes pay a small portion of that income for membership in the Christian association. Those members get to vote on whether new programs will be granted a religious exemption.

Association leaders say they spend months vetting new homes. They visit multiple times and review a home's policies. They also are required by law to run a criminal background check on all employees. The head of the home must have at least a high school diploma and a few years' experience running a home.

There is no litmus test to determine whether a home is truly guided by religion. Morrow said FACCCA officials use their own judgment to determine that during inspections.

In the end, the association has a reason to stringently monitor its homes, officials said.

"We are here to help kids and our reputation of not helping kids hurts us all," Smith said. "So we're pretty reluctant to take someone that we're not really confident in. If we get a home that gets a black eye, we all get a black eye."

A pattern of abuse

The Department of Children and Families takes complaints made against unlicensed religious homes when someone calls Florida's child abuse hotline. And it sends workers to investigate potential abuse and neglect.

But in the nearly 30 years since Florida began allowing religious exemptions, state officials have never tallied up how much abuse was occurring at the homes they stopped regulating.

The Times, in the first effort of its kind, requested public records noting abuse complaints for homes currently or formerly accredited by FACCCA. It also reviewed emergency dispatch records, police reports and court records.

The records show authorities have been called to the homes hundreds of times over the past decade for everything from runaways to suicide threats to child abuse allegations.

DCF alone has conducted at least 165 investigations into the mistreatment of children.

Its investigators found evidence to support allegations in more than a third of those cases - 63 incidents at 17 homes with a list of offenses that include physical injury, medical neglect, environmental hazards, threatened harm, bizarre punishment, inadequate supervision, mental injury, asphyxiation and sexual abuse.

Among the cases DCF "verified:" a 16-year-old girl in Orlando pressured to perform oral sex on a counselor she considered a father figure; a 15-year-old boy in Punta Gorda forced to lie facedown in the dirt for three hours as a 220-pound counselor lay on top of him; and a 16-year-old boy in Port St. Lucie, shackled for 12 days and berated by staff with racial slurs.

Extreme discipline

The most troubled programs are easy to see.

Of the 30 facilities reviewed by the Times, half had never been investigated by the state for abuse or neglect, and others had only a few, unsubstantiated allegations.

Seven facilities account for two-thirds of abuse hotline complaints over the past decade. Among them:



BOOTS AND BIBLES: Boys dressed in camouflage read from their Bibles during a church service at Gateway Academy in Bonifay on Oct. 5.

Gateway Christian Military Academy, Camp Tracey near Jacksonville, Anderson Academy in Vero Beach, Southeastern Military Academy in Port St. Lucie and Lighthouse of Northwest Florida in Jay.

Several others, including New Beginnings Girls Academy, have few hotline complaints but show up in Internet message boards and "survivor" groups.

Jamie Lee Schmude said she was 16 when her parents sent her to New Beginnings to stop her drinking and pot smoking.

She recounts extreme punishments, including being forced to stand in one place so long she urinated on herself.

One day in 2003, she'd had enough. When she was made to stand at a wall for a deed she doesn't remember, she gave up and sat.

She said girls were ordered to take her to the preacher, who made them pin her to the ground as his wife unhooked a thin plastic rod from the blinds.

The wife started swinging.

"It didn't matter where she hit me," Schmude recalled. "I had bruises all over my butt and my lower back and my upper legs."

Two others told the Times they were forced to witness it all, made to hold her down as she wailed on the filthy floor, then made to sing once it was over: Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...

Officials with New Beginnings Girls Academy did not respond to a phone call, emails or a letter sent by the Times. The home, which left Florida voluntarily in 2007, was last investigated in 2006 on allegations of sexual abuse. State officials found no evidence to support the claim, records show.

On the other side of the state, 16-year-old Cody Livingston found himself at Camp Tracey, a fundamentalist Baptist reform program on the rural outskirts of Jacksonville.

When Livingston got caught smoking cigarettes, they made him eat one. When he cursed, they made him swallow two spoonfuls of citrus-scented liquid soap, he said. "If I didn't do it, then I didn't get to eat that night."

But that paled in comparison to what he says hap-

pened when he got caught engaging in sexual activity with other boys in 2008.

They told him his mother didn't want him. They shaved his head. They made him carry two 5-gallon buckets of dirt everywhere he went, and at night, run laps around the dorm with a tire tied to his waist. They let him speak to no one but staff, and only if he was spoken to first, and they made him sleep on the floor of a mudroom for a week or more, giving him a bucket to use as a toilet.

"We got sprayed down with a water hose for our shower," Livingston said. "They made it very clear that we were not human; we were subhuman pieces of trash."

Officials at Camp Tracey declined to speak with a Times reporter.

Opening the gate

Florida became a magnet for unlicensed religious homes in the mid 1980s, when a small group of preachers teamed up with a powerful Florida legislator and a lobbyist to successfully press for a law that exempted them from state control.

Now, the homes answer to FACCCA instead of state regulators.

By law, FACCCA standards of child care must be in "substantial compliance" with the state's. But the state has not made sure the association's rules keep up with current standards.

DCF officials could find no evidence of an agency review of FACCCA rules since 1984. They asked the Christian association for a copy of its corporal punishment guidelines only after the Times began asking questions earlier this year.

David Wilkins, DCF's top administrator, said it is not the state's responsibility to review the association's standards unless they change.

"I don't believe the statute tells us we ought to be going out and regulating them," Wilkins said. "They provide us their standards, and we review those. Quite frankly, it hasn't been reviewed in years."

Held side-by-side in 2012, there are significant differences between the rule books.

The state requires a doctor's order to shackle children. FACCCA does not.

The state bans spanking and severely limits the time children can be held in isolation. FACCCA does not.

State-licensed facilities cannot punish children by withholding communication with parents and must guarantee kids access to an abuse hotline.

FACCCA officials say children can report abuse, but former students said they had no way. They can be denied access to a phone for any reason.

Experts say this is a recipe for trouble.

Jack Levine, who has a master's degree in child and family development and for 25 years served as president of a statewide network of advocates called Voices for Florida's Children, opposed the exemption back in 1984.

He still does.

"The great fertile ground for abuse and neglect is isolation," Levine said. "If you are isolated and don't have an avenue to express what you know, what you see, that promises further problems."

In 1984, mainstream religious organizations, including Catholic Community Services, Southern Baptist

Child Care Executives and others across the state, lined up to try to stop the exemption from becoming law. They echoed concerns from child advocates who predicted it would open the door to extremists.

"Any weirdo, any charlatan who has been kicked out of some other state could come into Florida and say, 'I'm a religious facility and I don't want to be licensed,'" Hugh Forsyth, director of a licensed girls' program in St. Petersburg, predicted to the Times in 1984.

"They just decide they're going to have a child care facility and away they go. There's nothing to stop them."

Ordained by God

New Beginnings was the kind of children's home FACCCA was created to regulate. Its founder was Lester Roloff, a Baptist radio preacher among the first to use religion as a shield against the licensing of a reform home.

The subject of repeated abuse allegations over several decades, the program left Texas for good in 2001 when that state's Legislature decided religious homes were no longer exempt from licensing.

It settled in a Panhandle city called Pace and remained there until 2007.

At New Beginnings, teenage girls got a heavy dose of strict Christianity. They were forbidden to wear pants or hear news of the outside world or even make eye contact with crowds when they toured churches in the summer.

Brittany Campbell arrived at the home in 2001.

Her sister enrolled her, Campbell said, after the 15-year-old smoked pot for the first time and began dating girls.

She recalls Pastor Bill McNamara's introduction during the first sermon.

"He just looked right at me from the platform, ran at me, and all these girls jumped out of the way," Campbell remembers. "And he jumps, like, onto the pew in front of me and then bent down at his waist and told me I was a 'faggot.' 'God's not going to bless a bunch of faggots.'"

The Times interviewed nine women who attended the home in Florida from 2001 to 2007.

They say their menstrual-stained underwear was waved around to chastise them for being unclean and recall being timed when they went to the bathroom and rationed squares of toilet paper based on what they disclosed they needed to do. They remember being awakened in the night, as the preacher stormed into their dorm, screaming that the room stank and he could "smell masturbation."

"Every time he said it, I would just cringe," recalls Anni Leigh Smith, now 26.

Reporting abuse? Unlikely, former residents said.

New Beginnings, like many other unlicensed homes, monitored all phone conversations.

Several former New Beginnings residents said they were scared to speak out and were intimidated by adults at the home about talking to investigators.

Campbell said she witnessed the whipping of Jamie Schmude. She said before DCF came asking questions, she was coached by the stout, fiery McNamara.

"He would play that sort of thing from a classic cult angle," Campbell said. "Related them (investigators)

to Satan.... ‘These people don’t know what we do here. The world doesn’t support God’s way’...

“We were under his authority, as ordained by God.”

Today, the women have a 130-member Facebook group called “Proactive Survivors of New Beginnings Girls Academy.” In recent years, there has been online talk about the new children’s home that moved in after New Beginnings left Florida for Missouri.

Newer Beginnings

Marvelous Grace Girls Academy now sits at the end of that long, clay driveway in Pace.

It is hard to tell where New Beginnings ends and Marvelous Grace begins.

The property has not been sold since its days under Pastor McNamara. It is still owned by a corporation that lists McNamara as an officer. And though the girls of New Beginnings recall moving to Missouri in 2007, back in Florida, police reports continued to call the home by the same name for years.

The home’s website in 2009 called Steven Blankenship executive director for “New Beginnings Girls Academy.” On that site, Blankenship - now director at Marvelous Grace - said he found God “after years of living as a Satanist and a Witch.”

Another defunct site, truth4teens.org, showed photos of Blankenship preaching during radio broadcasts and revivals and listed his name under blog entries. The site called hatred “a family value.”

It also showed what the site called a brain scan of a man hospitalized for voices in his head. The image contained a horned shape that the site suggested was the face of Satan caught by modern medical equipment. “It has been validated as authentic!” the site declared.

Marvelous Grace has no state license and is not accredited by FACCCA. DCF investigated an abuse allegation in 2010, finding no evidence.

Blankenship declined to be interviewed. In an email, he wrote: “Please do not call, email, text, send letter, or show up on Marvelous Grace Girls Academy’s property.”

He told the Times he will be accredited by January 2013.

Desperate for help

Not everyone calls the children who pass through an unlicensed home “survivors.” Many see the homes as saviors, when all else has failed.

Parents from across the country gathered one recent Friday on a remote Panhandle property, the home of Gateway Christian Military Academy, also known as Teen Challenge, in Bonifay.

Dozens sat in folding chairs outside the children’s home and applauded their sons, once drug-addicted and defiant, as they marched in camouflage and recited in perfect unison this passage from Hebrews:

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.

A handful of rule-breakers were not allowed to participate. They stood off to the side in faded orange jumpsuits.

The jumpsuits, some missing buttons and held together by duct tape, are also worn by new recruits in



PATH TO RIGHTEOUSNESS: A drill instructor crouches and prays with a boy during a church service at Gateway Academy in Bonifay on Oct. 5.

the first days when drill instructors get in their faces and make them exercise; it’s what Samson Lehman had on when he was made to run until he almost died.

Parents assembled for the monthly visit know this place is tough. That’s why they chose it.

Sabrina and Lane Stromsnes, registered nurses from Plant City, almost lost their 13-year-old son to a progression of drugs that culminated in crack.

The parents thought they had covered their bases. They drug tested their son, took him to a counselor, even sat behind him in school.

The decision to send him away became clear the night they found him running through the woods, nearly naked and out of his mind. They believe if they hadn’t taken him to Gateway, he would be dead.

Now, they see their son healthy. They know he can’t sneak out like he used to. He is sober, alive.

“I just hugged my son,” the father said. “I kissed him. I told him I loved him. And I know that next May, I’ll get him back.”

During a nighttime service, as Christian rock played, boys overcome by emotion fell to their knees and cried. Drill instructors hugged them, held them and whispered prayers into their ears.

Despite such tender moments, instructors’ rough tactics have brought DCF investigators into the Panhandle group home 24 times in its 14-year history, with allegations of bizarre punishment, beatings, physical injury and medical neglect.

DCF had verified such claims in five cases and found credible evidence of similar mistreatment in three others by 2008, when a woman dropped off a 15-year-old son she suspected had been drinking.

On the verge of death

Samson Lehman was a straight-A student enrolled in honors Algebra and English. He had no juvenile record, and his guidance counselor thought his friends were the “cream of the crop.”

He said he was caught off-guard when men in camouflage patted him down, called him a mom beater and a drug addict and began a marathon of exercise that ended only when his body gave out.

Clammy. Pale. Changing colors. That’s how staff members described Lehman’s appearance more than 24 hours before they drove him to the hospital, a Holmes County sheriff’s report shows.

Four other boys watched him vomit repeatedly. Boys watched him fall during seemingly endless laps inside the barracks, and they watched staff restrain him.

Counselors offered him ibuprofen, which his doctor would later say can cause kidney damage in a dehydrated person. Then they waited an entire day before driving him to the hospital, a sheriff’s report shows.

Emergency room tests showed Lehman’s organs were shutting down. He was airlifted to an intensive care unit at Children’s Hospital in Alabama, where his doctor described a “race for time.”

“Waste products had accumulated to a dangerous extent,” nephrologist Dr. Frank Tenney wrote in a letter to DCF that Lehman gave the Times. “Left untreated, his heart would certainly have stopped in a short time.”

DCF investigated and listed the case as “verified medical neglect,” finding a “preponderance of credible evidence.” But the State Attorney’s Office in Holmes

County did not pursue charges.

Pastor David Rutledge, director of the children’s home, says Lehman’s illness was the result of a young man arriving with mineral deficiencies. He points out the home now employs a registered nurse, has a doctor on its board and requires all incoming residents to pass a metabolic panel. He said boys are no longer forced to endure such long stretches of intense exercise.

Lehman is now 20 and majoring in engineering at the University of Florida.

He endured months of dialysis. Years of nightmares.

“The whole time, the thought is running through me, like, I don’t deserve this, this sucks,” Lehman said.

“You can’t do anything as a child to protect yourself.”

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report.



CHAPTER AND VERSE: A sign near the driveway of Marvelous Grace Girls Academy in Pace quotes Scripture about grace and humility. Marvelous Grace has no state license and is not accredited by FACCCA.

About the reporting for this series

The Tampa Bay Times spent a year gathering thousands of pages of public records and interviewing dozens of young adults who passed through the unlicensed group homes that operate in Florida.

The newspaper focused its investigation primarily on homes and reform programs for teens that are exempt from state oversight for religious reasons. Under state law, the authority over those facilities is the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a private, nonprofit group.

During its reporting, the newspaper also uncovered and included in its analysis several reform homes that had no state license or FACCCA accreditation. Some of those homes had previously been accredited by FACCCA. Others never had credentials.

For all the homes, the Times requested information on every abuse investigation prompted by calls to the Department of Children and Families’ abuse hotline. The newspaper also talked to dozens of former residents and gathered health inspection reports, 911 dispatch records, police reports and lawsuits related to the homes.

Rules vary

In Florida, the oversight of children's homes can vary greatly depending on how the facility classifies itself.

OVERSIGHT AND INSPECTION

DCF licensed facilities: The Department of Children and Families runs background checks on employees, inspects annually and can order changes in a home's practices.

FACCCA oversight: Homes with religious exemptions answer to this nonprofit group, which conducts its own inspections. They provide names of children's home employees to the state, which runs background checks.

Unaccredited boarding schools: The state Department of Education registers these schools but does not inspect them or review their operations. Boarding schools must seek accreditation, but they have three years.

ABILITY TO REPORT ABUSE

DCF: All children must have access to a phone to call Florida's child abuse hotline.

FACCCA: Officials say kids have a right to report abuse, but former residents said they had no way. Children can be denied access to phones for months at a time. Unaccredited boarding schools: No guaranteed access or training.

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

DCF: Banned.

FACCCA: Allowed, with guidelines. Unaccredited boarding schools: No limits on corporal punishment.

SHACKLING AND CONFINEMENT

DCF: Rules vary from one type of facility to another, but mechanical restraints typically require permission from a doctor. Even confining a child to a room generally has a one hour limit.

FACCCA: Does not endorse mechanical restraints but allows it. No restriction on how long a child can be secluded. FACCCA director expects board to toughen restrictions next month. Unaccredited boarding schools: No limits

RELIGIOUS SERVICES

DCF: Many programs offer prayer and church services, but children cannot be forced to attend.

FACCCA: Mandatory prayer and services are allowed. Children must be prayed with after corporal punishment. Unaccredited boarding schools: No restrictions

LEADER CREDENTIALS

DCF: Director must have a bachelor's degree and at least three years' experience in management.

FACCCA: Director must have at least a high school diploma or equivalent and four years with executive experience in child care and development.

Unaccredited boarding schools: No requirements.

