



CAICA

Coalition Against Institutionalized Child Abuse

www.CAICA.org

June 18, 2008

The Honorable George Miller
Chairman
Committee on Education and Labor
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

**Re: H.R. 5876 Stop Child Abuse in
Residential Programs for Teens Act of 2008**

Dear Congressman Miller:

I would like to start by thanking you for your hard work and dedication to stopping abuse of children and teens in private residential programs and in your efforts with the HR 5876: Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act of 2008.

The Coalition Against Institutionalized Child Abuse (CAICA) is an organization dedicated to exposing abuse, neglect, and deaths in residential programs for children and teens. As you know, common problems that occur in some unscrupulous programs include the hiring of unqualified, uncaring, and untrained staff, programs that are unlicensed and unregulated, a lack of oversight, programs located in remote rural areas away from the general public, substandard medical care, substandard diet, withholding of essential food and water, clothing, shelter, forced exercise, the dangerous use of restraints by untrained and unqualified staff, and the list goes on.

Today more than ever parents are resorting to sending their children and teens away to residential programs. In today's harried world many parents find themselves unable to cope and when problems arise there is often little help within their families or communities, many have turned to the Internet for help.

There are people who have for years preyed on their desperation. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has uncovered deceitful marketing practices, including marketing agents who are ready with their "one size fits all" script to parents, promising to "fix" their child. Beyond exasperation parents believe the promises. The agents take advantage of the fact that parents are unaware the industry is largely

unregulated and that punitive measures taken by these programs sometimes result in lifelong emotional scarring, and in the worse case the death of a child.

According to parents, they are often encouraged to use a teen transport company rather than transporting their children themselves. Parents then do not even see the program their child is attending. The transport company convinces parents the path to least resistance is picking the child up in the middle of the night. Parents are further convinced there will be less drama if they are not anywhere to be seen or heard. The child is then awakened, unaware of their parent's plans. They are asked to get dressed and are forced to go with complete strangers. They are often lied to, told they are being taken to a "surf camp" or "scuba diving" camp so they will cooperate. It is not until they are pulling up to the program that they learn they are being sent to a behavior modification program.

I have been told by educational consultants that they feel this is the "most humane" way to get kids, as young as seven, to these programs. I have recently read a book that states it is the child who pushed their parents to this point, so it is the child's responsibility to get over this trauma, and that they will. However, after speaking with hundreds of parents and young people who have attended these programs and who have been transported in this fashion it has become apparent they do not simply "get over it".

Every young person I have spoken with who attended one of these programs have indicated most children enrolled are not drug-addicted, involved in gangs, or in trouble with the law.

Some program owners have created a multi-level type of system wherein parents who place children into their programs are offered a month's free tuition for each child they refer to their programs. At the tune of \$3,500 to \$5,000 or more per month, this is quite an incentive for families. And when their child is no longer in the program, they continue to earn \$1,000 for each child they refer into their programs.

This has been happening since the 90s. Lawsuits have been filed, some have been won, some have been lost, and most settle out of court quietly. Yet they continue to thrive and grow, housing what some estimate to be about 20,000 children and teens each year.

Last year the Government Accountability Office (GAO) interviewed parents whose children had died in programs and found thousands of incidents of abuse. More recently the GAO provided recordings of fictitious calls made to marketing agents. During one such call, the marketing agent warned a fictitious caller [posing as a father], "The way I would like for you to explain it to her [wife] so she doesn't just freak out, I want you to tell her it's a college prep boarding school that focuses on the emotional needs of a teenager. If she thinks you want to send her daughter to a place where there are drug addicts and people that are all screwed up, she will look at you and say no way. So the way you approach her is like I just said ..."

The CAICA website, www.caica.org, was created to inform the public of this growing national problem and to help others expose abuse in residential treatment

settings. It has been used by educators, lawyers, government officials, the media, parents, and others. The Fair Use Notice allows copyrighted materials to be used to expose human rights issues. Therefore, information on the website is available to those who wish to use it to effect positive change.

The House of Representatives is expected to vote on passage of H.R. 5876. CAICA encourages others to call their Representatives in Congress and ask them to vote in favor of H.R. 5876. Representatives can be reached through the Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121, or by visiting <http://mygov.governmentguide.com/mygov/dbq/officials/>.

Time is of the essence. Again, thank you Congressman Miller, and Congresswoman McCarthy, and to all of your staff for the continued important work you are doing to help protect children. CAICA believes “no child should be abused in the name of treatment”.

Jeff Berryman, a long-time child advocate for this cause was named CAICA’s Advocate of the Month in December 2006. He volunteered many hours as a researcher for CAICA and actively worked to keep advocates informed of pertinent news and information. In 2002 Jeff was sued by a huge conglomerate for his efforts in speaking out against abuse in their programs. He fought for his case, and for the children, which cost him his family inheritance. He won.

On May 9, 2008, Jeff suddenly and unexpectedly passed away. He would have been thrilled to see that on May 14 a House committee signed off on H.R. 5876. He saw the work Congressman Miller has done, and that of the GAO, and was hopeful this bill would pass. It is my hope that we will all work together so his dream and everyone’s hard work will finally come to fruition.

“All the evil in the world begins with evil done unto children” J. Berryman

Very truly yours,

Isabelle Zehnder
Founder and President