

Oregon sends foster kids to facilities accused of abuse

State senator is troubled by report

By LAUREN DAKE
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Last year, Washington state child welfare officials saw reports about widespread use of restraints and physical abuse at a residential treatment facility in Iowa where they were sending foster care children.

Washington stopped sending children to the for-profit Clarinda Academy.

But some of Oregon's most vulnerable children are still there.

An October report by the nonprofit Disability Rights Washington concluded that Washington's use of out-of-state facilities to house foster children was "creating an unacceptably heightened risk of abuse and neglect" and causing more "harm to youth who have already suffered from multiple, prolonged, or chronic traumatic events."

In Oregon, the number of children being sent to out-of-state, privately run psychiatric units has more than doubled since 2017. There are more than 80 children placed in out-of-state facilities. The majority are in facilities run by Alabama-based Sequel Youth and Family Services, which oversees Clarinda Academy in Iowa and a number of other for-profit facilities across the country.

There are 11 Oregon foster children in Iowa facilities run by Sequel and another 39 foster kids in Sequel facilities in Utah. Across the country, about 74 Oregon children are in Sequel centers.

These children have not been sent out-of-state because they have committed crimes, but rather because Oregon does not have enough beds to house them. Yet, they are being treated as if they are inmates, according to the Disability Rights Washington report.



Bradley W. Parks/Oregon Public Broadcasting
State Sen. Sara Gelsler speaks on the floor of the Senate in January.

Before the watchdog group launched a systemic investigation into the Iowa facility, its researchers spent two days conducting private interviews with about a dozen young people in the facility.

"Practically every young person who spoke ... discussed or alluded to experiencing multiple traumatic events of sexual or physical assault and/or abandonment by trusted adults in their lives, and almost all had been through multiple placements prior to coming to Iowa," the report reads.

Oregon child welfare officials said they were aware of documented problems — including liberal and questionable use of physical restraints — at some facilities they are using to house children.

After the allegations of abuse in Iowa surfaced, a spokesman from the Oregon Department of Human Services said in an email, a representative of Clarinda Academy and Sequel visited Oregon to respond.

Oregon staff also flew to Iowa to check on the children at Clarinda, according to a Department of Human Services spokesman. In addition, the state says, Ore-

gon contracts with third-party professionals to monitor children at all out-of-state facilities. Based on those visits, Oregon officials determined foster children being sent elsewhere are safe.

State Sen. Sara Gelsler, D-Corvallis, had a different reaction when she was recently alerted to the situation.

"I can't see how you have these unsafe things happening in these facilities and you think the Oregon kids are OK," said Gelsler, who chairs the Senate Human Services Committee. "Kids out of state are so vulnerable. They are so far away from home ... They are isolated from their families. They have already been identified as difficult kids so people don't believe them and then they are isolated."

Gelsler, who is also a member of a task force working to help Oregon foster children with specialized needs, was upset.

"I had no idea we were contracting with an enormous for-profit organization that seems to specialize in taking kids from states with foster care capacity problems and certainly had no idea we had kids in places where there are very seri-

ous allegations of abuse and neglect," Gelsler said.

Oregon was recently sued by lawyers representing foster children for placing some children removed from their homes in hotels. The state has largely stopped doing that, but almost simultaneously, has quietly increased the number of foster children sent out of state.

Department of Human Services and child welfare officials are required to make regular reports to Gelsler's legislative committee. Yet Gelsler was unaware of the magnitude of the problem.

"I'm stunned we didn't know about this enormous number of kids out of state," she said. "I'm dumbfounded there is this huge general fund expenditure ... I don't understand, this is a major expenditure that we've never discussed at the Legislature," she said.

From October to December, the state spent about \$2.5 million to send children out of state.

Disturbing reports from Iowa

Susan Kas, an attorney with Disability Rights Washington and one of the investigators who looked into Sequel's Clarinda Academy,

said they chose to examine Clarinda simply because it had the most Washington children.

In other words, the advocacy group chose Clarinda Academy for investigation essentially at random, not because they suspected anything was amiss. If one agency chosen arbitrarily has problems, Kas said, shouldn't the state take a closer look at all the out-of-state facilities it uses?

Kas argued their findings warrant a much deeper look at what she called the states' "dirty little secret" of sending foster children out of state.

She called what Disability Rights Washington discovered "disturbing."

There appeared to be very little oversight of the program for sending foster children elsewhere, she said.

In Washington state, some children flew to Iowa alone, and strangers picked them up to drive them to the facility. Like Oregon, Washington state primarily contracts with third-party social workers to oversee children sent out of state.

"We have no reason to believe kids have any better protection from this kind of thing ... Not just at Sequel, but any other company that is charging \$8,000 to \$10,000 a month," Kas said. "If there is no oversight, there is a high risk (abuse) could be happening."

The alleged abuse came to light in Washington because Kas and her team have the ability under federal law to access certain records, which helped with their investigation into Washington's placements.

Oregon's child welfare officials required Oregon Public Broadcasting to file a formal public records request to even learn the name of the out-of-state facilities where the state sends children. It took several more days, phone calls and emails before the child

welfare office disclosed how many children are placed at each facility.

Oregon officials have not yet responded with details about how often caseworkers travel with children when they are sent out of state, how frequently caseworkers from Oregon see children face to face once they are in another state, or if any of the foster care children from Oregon have complained about their treatment.

When OPB asked child welfare officials for specific details of their oversight of the out-of-state facilities, a spokesman responded by email: "The department goes through an extensive check for any facility, including reviewing information at a state's licensing body, making sure the facility is in good standing, verifying secretary of state business records, and conducting other research."

Questions about Clarinda Academy

Clarinda Academy is the flagship campus of Sequel, a for-profit corporation that has acquired or opened 32 other facilities, including locked and psychiatric residential facilities, across the country, according to Disability Rights Washington's investigation.

The facility was established in 1992 and houses children from all over the country, usually more than 200 people between the ages of 12 and 18, according to the report.

According to the report, Clarinda Academy is essentially run like a correctional institution. The facility is actually co-located on the grounds of a state prison. Children aren't allowed to leave the institution at will, and they are isolated; it's difficult to make phone calls, they aren't allowed to interact with members of the opposite sex, and they attend class at the facility rather than going to outside schools.



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