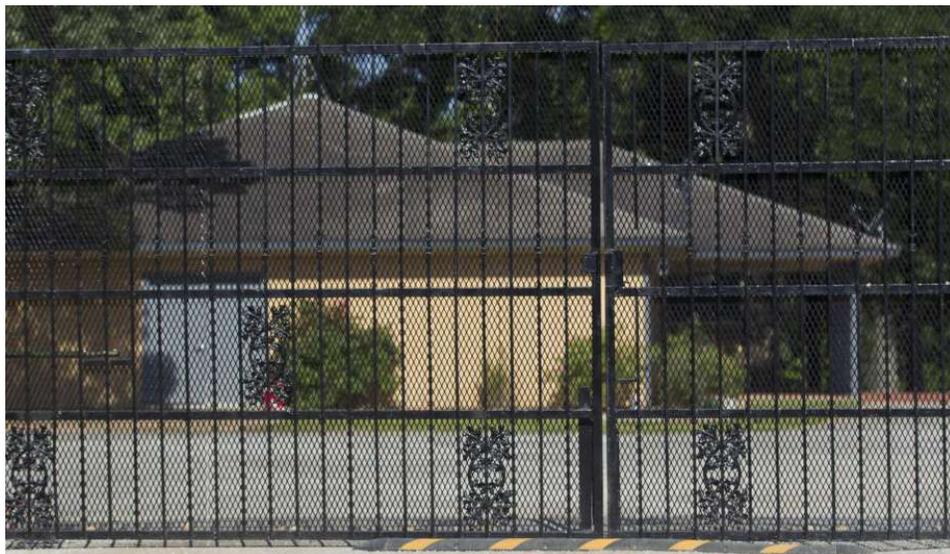


Montgomery County officials raid care facility for girls after allegation of abuse

By Catherine Dominguez and John D. Harden Updated 7:54 pm, Thursday, May 17, 2018

Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer / Houston Chronicle



The Care Cottage is seen along I-45 South on Thursday, May 17, 2018, in Willis.

Five staff members were fired from two residential treatment facilities for girls before Montgomery County law officials raided the facility Wednesday, part of an ongoing criminal investigation into complaints of neglect, improper supervision, physical and sexual abuse, according to state officials and law enforcement.

Troubling living conditions — including broken windows, moldy bathrooms and holes in the wall — and a lack of employee background investigations at the Care Cottage treatment facility for girls in Willis have been documented in state inspections.

Tejal Patel, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, said that 56 girls the agency placed at Care Cottage have been interviewed and are “currently safe.” “All of the abuse/neglect allegations reported to us have been or are being investigated by DFPS,” Patel said in an emailed statement. “While [Child Protective Services] continues to look into the situation and provide information to law enforcement as requested, it is important that these children continue to receive all their needed services, go to school, and focus on their individual situations.”

Patel said five staff members, including one suspected of sexual abuse, had been fired but did not provide details about the dismissals or when they occurred.

The Care Cottage facilities, which are licensed for 65 girls ages 6 to 17, are operated by the private HTK Care Foundation Inc, which is registered to Harold Taylor and his wife, Tabitha. Staff members at the facility contacted Wednesday and Thursday said there was no administrator available to comment on the raid or allegations of neglect and abuse of residents.

The nonprofit foundation that operates the homes receives up to \$435 per day per resident to provide care. The foundation's annual report in 2016 listed income of \$1.1 million and expenses of \$1.1 million, with the Taylors each drawing salaries of \$80,000.

A sworn statement from an investigator used to obtain the search warrant executed Wednesday at the facilities outlined a number of allegations reported by residents to Willis ISD officials and others about abuse and neglect, including leaving students unattended and staff parties involving alcohol.

The investigator said in the sworn statement that some girls in the residential facility had been injured while being restrained, and that others were hog-tied by staff members and placed face down. Others girls were injured after trying to escape by jumping out of a second-floor window that was not repaired.

At least three staff members are accused of having sexual relations with girls in their care, according to the statement.

Ongoing investigation

Girls who spoke to case workers with the state's Child Protective Services during inspections were later punished by staff, who withheld snacks, phone privileges and other rewards, according to the affidavit. Some of the allegations were recent, including a report by residents that Care Cottage staff were consuming alcohol on the property May 5 and that several appeared to be drunk. They left alcoholic drinks behind that residents drank, according to the reports.

Tyler Dunman, who heads the Special Crimes Bureau at the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, said the raid was executed at both Willis locations to gather evidence. Helping with the execution of the warrant were the Precinct 1 Constable's Office. No criminal charges have been filed but the investigation is ongoing, he said.

Dunman said Willis ISD teachers and administrators have been monitoring the situation at the facilities for months, since many of the girls attend Willis schools.

"It's been ongoing for a number of months," Dunman said. "We received information from sources at Willis ISD and other sources that have been reviewing incidents at the facility. Ultimately, we decided ... it was necessary to act on the recent allegations of sexual abuse and a very serious allegation of physical abuse where one child suffered a broken arm and was not treated appropriately."

The prosecutor added, "We felt we needed to go in and address these matters and proceed forward with our criminal investigation."

Dozens of complaints

County Attorney J. D. Lambricht said he heard from Willis ISD Superintendent Tim Harkrider about three weeks ago about concerns regarding the care of the girls at Care Cottage.

"He was reaching out to me to see what I could do," Lambricht said. His office eventually compiled complaints about 90 different incidents. Among the allegations outlined in the warrant is a report of an anonymous voicemail left on April 4 for a Willis administrator reporting that a Care Cottage employee was having sexual relations with a 16-year-old resident.

Lambright also noted one girl's arm was reportedly broken as she was being restrained, but that she received minimal treatment for the injury. "The place needs to go away," Lambright said. "I don't think enhanced monitoring is the answer."

In the last two years, the state protective services conducted 64 inspections of the Care Cottage homes. The inspections reports revealed a facility that was often cited for not providing a safe space for its girls, not properly backgrounding its employees and often using unnecessary force to restrain them.

In December 2017, the department reported two staff members did not have completed background checks and another five staff members had not cleared a background check prior to their hire date.

In April, state inspectors with the health department noted that the cottages were unsanitary. They reported mold in the showers, holes in the wall, clogged drains and broken blinds. In one of the bathrooms, the toilet was missing the top, according to state reports.

During a series of investigations from March to November 2017, Child Protective Services reported that the staff improperly restrained the residents and used excessive force.

More recently, a child ran away in March and the center failed to report the incident.