Quotes

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Report lists problems at rehab centers

■ **MARTINEZ:** Assembly bill would set guidelines for voluntary training of drug treatment counselors

By Bruce Gerstman
STAFF WRITER

Too many drug treatment counselors in California are unskilled, unethical and uneducated, according to a report released today by a Danville-based drug treatment organization.

The Justin Foundation, an organization that helps families affected by drug use, determined that 40 percent of patient deaths in state-licensed drug and alcohol treatment centers over seven years were caused by failures by counselors.

"For most Californians, rehab is not the glitzy, star-studded yoga retreat portrayed in celebrity magazines," the organization's founder, Cathie Smith, said Thursday. "Rehab with unskilled or unethical counselors can be harmful and, in some cases, deadly."

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The foundation announced its study at a news conference in Martinez to support a bill introduced by Assemblyman Mark DeSaulnier, D-Concord.

The bill, AB1367, is intended for unlicensed counselors who run private, out-patient drug and alcohol treatment practices to voluntarily obtain a license. A state licensing board would create standards in education and training.

In response to the foundation's report, the state's Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs, which licenses the centers and counselors, said counselors continually update their skills.

"We believe that ongoing training for counselors is necessary and mandatory for counselors that are certified in the state," said department spokeswoman Lisa Fisher.

The foundation, using state records, found that 67 deaths occurred from 2000 through 2006 in the 1,500 treatment programs licensed by the state's Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs. It also found instances of sexual abuse and inappropriate relationships between patients and counselors.

The state department reported about 685,000 admissions to treatment programs during that time.

In one 2004 example at a Northern California facility, an alcoholic died while going through withdrawal under the supervision of untrained residents. Investigators said the facility violated its own policy by not having trained staff monitor the patient, the report said.

In another example, a 3-year-old boy died in 2000 when he drank his aunt's medication that she brought home from a Bay Area narcotic treatment center. Investigators said the counselors should have known that the child was at risk in the woman's home, according to the report.

Smith's own son, Justin Smith, was 22 when he died in a drug treatment program he had entered in 2000 for his methamphetamine addiction. Smith declined to discuss specifics, citing a pending lawsuit. She said the staff was to blame.

Now, all residential drug and alcohol treatment centers must have 30 percent of their counselors meet minimal education requirements by 2010, said Bob Tyler, president of the California Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors, an organization of independent counselors.

And the standards are too low, he said. For instance, counselors in California need 160 hours of supervised training, compared with 300 hours required in 44 other states.

"We must insist that the state raise the standards," he said.

DeSaulnier said his bill offers the first step in raising the standards for residential drug treatment counselors addressed in the Justin Foundation's report.

Currently, anyone can call themselves a drug and alcohol counselor without any state regulation. With licensing, prospective patients will know that somebody who advertises that they are licensed actually has a formal background in chemical dependency counseling.

"Imagine turning your loved one over to professional caregivers and finding out that there is a very real possibility that they will be abused at the most important part of their lives," DeSaulnier said.

The California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists says the bill does not do enough because it only requires a formal background in treating drug and alcohol problems but not other underlying emotional problems.