

Rehab House Owner Tries to Quell Concerns

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By Marilyn Young/ LB Indy

Scores of anxious residents voiced their fears about a detox and rehab facility near Top of the World Elementary School at a town hall meeting this past Tuesday, Feb. 2.



Scores of residents turn out this week at a town hall meeting to voice concerns over rehab facilities in their neighborhoods. Photo by Marilyn Young

Both the owner and director of Pillars Recovery, which opened at 28772 Top of the World Dr. last year in close proximity to the campus, addressed the crowd of about 150 people and defended the facility's practices.

Principal Michael Conlon organized the meeting with city and police officials to inform concerned parents and others about laws that restrict the city from regulating state licensed recovery houses. Police provided a list to participants of the handful of calls for police service received from two recovery facilities that are the focus of concern.

Pillars Recovery owner Lisa Willis said she understands curiosity about the facility, but that fears are overblown in part because people seem uninformed about the levels of care provided at the facility. She said the six residents are monitored around the clock and participate in groups from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. at night. They have no cars, visitors and their place of residence is confidential. "The people in that house are at the height of awareness; they've done everything right," Willis said. "We want it run well. It makes everyone's life easier. We don't want to call 911," Willis said.

Since the facility opened, police have received three calls for service, two patrol checks and a medical aid, which involved neither a drug overdose nor violence, according to police Detective Cornelius Ashton.

Pillars Director Lisa Friedman, who diagnoses and evaluates potential patients, was asked if she would accept a sex offender. Friedman said she would not and would refer them to a facility better skilled to meet their needs.

Despite the apparent neighborhood backlash to Pillars Recovery, Willis said she is not considering moving.

Thirteen licensed non-medical alcoholism and drug abuse recovery or treatment facilities operate in Laguna Beach, according to a January status report by the state Department of Health Care Service. Two more are in process, according to Ann Larson, the city's assistant director of community development.

At the meeting, Larson described the variations among recovery facilities, which operate under different regulations and are licensed by different authorities. In general, residential care facilities are subject to state regulations and licensing, which preempts local regulations by cities.

Deputy City Attorney Ajit Thind laid out state and federal statutes, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, and their protections for group homes that provide treatment for the disabled. They also apply to group homes for recovering drug and alcohol addicts. "As to the unlicensed facilities, they are still afforded protection by ADA as well as fair housing laws. But if they are engaging in nuisance-like activities, the city can enforce and they can do so by administrative citation. At this point we haven't gotten to this point with any facility," Thind said.

Federal laws were enacted to promote the integration of individuals with disabilities into the community and to prohibit discrimination against them.

Ashton urged participants to play a role in documenting crime in their neighborhood. "You are our eyes and ears. Contact the police not just about the facilities, but anything that makes you uncomfortable," Ashton said, who noted that "Top of the World is actually one of the safest areas in our city."

The principal said TOW school has not experienced any incidents related to Pillars Recovery. "Of course I wouldn't want it to be as close to the school as it is," said Conlon, indicating that school district officials intend to push for a legislative remedy to restrict recovery houses near schools.

The two facilities that were the focus of concerns have been inspected by city code enforcement officers and are in compliance with their state licensing requirements, Larson said. The number of sober living group homes in Laguna is not known because there is no licensing requirement by either the city or the state.

Larson intends to ask elected officials to endorse a letter urging a change in state laws to allow cities more discretion in regulating rehab houses through zoning.

City officials are monitoring regulations adopted by other cities to see what locally enacted land-use regulations survive court challenge, she said.

Residents can report suspected criminal activity to police at (949) 497-0701, municipal violations to the code enforcement division at (949) 497-0301, or license violations to the Department of Health Care Services at (877) 685-8333.