

Written Testimony for The United States House Committee on Education and Labor

Submitted by Jan Moss, Executive Director
National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs

2175 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC
October 10, 2007

Mr. Chairman, Mr. McKeon, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing. I am Jan Moss.

I am a mother of two grown children and a grandmother of three. To those of you who have spoken today of your devastating losses, I express my condolences, respect and utmost deference. I have not suffered the loss of a child. I do, however, have a nephew who suffered abuse in an offshore program.

I am here as the Executive Director of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, generally known as NATSAP. We were established in 1999 in an effort to raise the bar of the private therapeutic programs serving children and families in crisis. Among our goals is the complete elimination of the abusive and neglectful practices we have heard about today. Clearly we still have a long way to go.

Chairman Miller, you acknowledged in your December 2005 letter to the Government Accountability Office that there are, indeed, "programs that provide high-quality services to help troubled adolescents get back on track." The three personal narratives I am attaching to my written testimony underscore the value of high-quality therapeutic schools and programs. We are committed to ensuring that these programs remain available to families in dire need of help. We are working to ensure that the only programs on the market are those of the highest quality.

NATSAP is the only entity in this country working with therapeutic schools and programs to improve them. We are a trade organization. We do not provide certifications or conduct investigations.

I am attaching the Ethical Principles of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs to my written testimony. Our Principles of Best Practice are based on our 12 Ethical Principles and were formulated using the standards set by the Joint Commission, which accredits nearly 15,000 health care programs in the United States. We will not accept or retain members that do not abide by our ethics or attest to following our Principles of Good Practice.

When we receive notification of a concern about one of our members, we review evidence from state licensing authorities, attorneys general, accrediting bodies, and other third parties. If a member has acted in a manner inconsistent with the law or our Principles, we proceed on a case-by-case basis, either requiring the program to implement change, or cancelling its membership. NATSAP will review the findings of the GAO's investigation into NATSAP member programs and will take action as appropriate.

Our professional development activities include a national conference, which over 700 people attend annually. We hold six regional conferences, with an estimated total attendance of over 800 individuals. Each conference provides continuing education courses led by industry experts, university researchers, and other clinical professionals.

In 2006, NATSAP launched its first professional Journal. Dr. Michael Gass of the University of New Hampshire is the managing editor. In 2007, NATSAP launched its Research Initiative, which will provide members an affordable data-collection tool to evaluate the effectiveness of their clinical work. The University of New Hampshire will house the database, making it available not only to internal, but also external researchers. Dr. Keith Russell, University of Minnesota, has just released the results of his four years of research on outdoor behavioral treatment.

In 2007, the NATSAP Board of Directors strengthened NATSAP's membership requirements. We now require members to be licensed by the appropriate state mental health agency, or accredited by a reputable mental health accreditation organization, such as the Joint Commission.

Unfortunately, not all states have licensing requirements. We are working to address this inadequacy. We have worked successfully with the State of Utah to establish regulations for therapeutic boarding schools, which had previously escaped licensure requirements by claiming plain "boarding school" status. In Montana, we worked diligently to have appropriate licensure requirements put into place, but the stringent bill we favored lost to a less rigorous bill.

We continue to push for strong state licensure and monitoring requirements. We are hopeful that Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and this Committee will help us in these efforts. We need your assistance.

The American Bar Association has submitted to this Committee the ABA's recommendations for legislation to assure the safety of children and youth placed in private residential treatment facilities. We are in fundamental agreement to the extent that the ABA recommends licensure and monitoring of these facilities. We expand on the ABA's recommendations by supporting licensure and monitoring of all adolescent treatment facilities, including those that are funded by public entities.

Mr. Chairman and Mr. McKeon, NATSAP extends its sincere appreciation for your commitment to eliminating deceptive, abusive, and neglectful programs by encouraging state licensure and enforcement. We are committed to working with this Committee, other organizations, and parents to draft and enact meaningful legislation to put an end to the horrific pain and suffering we have heard about today.

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Attachment 1

Testimony of [REDACTED]
Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor
October 10, 2007

Chairman Miller and Honorable Committee Members, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony of hope and success with you.

To understand my viewpoint regarding the issue at hand, a brief history of my past is necessary. My name is [REDACTED]. I am a 19 year old recovering heroin addict living in Salt Lake City. I began smoking pot at age 13. From there I rapidly progressed to pain medications and eventually became confined to a vicious heroin addiction. I have been to four different treatment facilities, both in and out of Utah. I have been admitted to the psychiatric ward several instances for drug related problems. I have also been part of the juvenile court system. I stole, lied, cheated, abused, neglected, and rationalized my way through my addiction. My story is no different than any other addict out there in such that I have the disease of addiction and must do everything in my power to keep this demon in remission.

It took years of using and several treatment programs for me to finally make the decision to change my life around. Obviously, the choice to stay sober is made by myself, and only for myself, but the treatment programs I attended were influential in helping me make this choice. The reason I did not remain sober after my first programs was do to a conscious decision on my part. The treatment centers provided me with all the necessary life skills, coping mechanisms, and tools to remain sober, but I simply chose not to apply the knowledge and skills I had been presented with. Two of the programs I went to were very impressive, and two were not. I can't blame a program for my relapses because although a program may not have been as quality as another, I was still made aware of my addiction, yet chose to ignore all the instruction I had been given.

I feel very fortunate to be alive today. I live a wonderful life and could not be happier. I am about to graduate from Salt Lake Community College with my Associates of Science Degree in Social Work. I have a 4.0 college GPA and plan to go for my Masters degree. I have a stable job. Relationships with family and friends have been restored to the fullest. I attend A.A. meetings regularly. I am on the Alumni Council of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs. I am also on the Salt Lake Mayors Coalition for Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs. As I said, life is beautiful at the moment. I have been given a second chance at life. This second chance was made possible by the many professionals and staff I encountered at various treatment centers throughout my journey. As we are all aware, the price of drug rehabilitation is quite expensive, but the lessons learned and the tools that are provided through such programs are priceless.

I am very grateful to my family for providing me with such resources as drug rehabilitation. I am also grateful for those individuals who have helped shape my life into something truly amazing. I respectfully ask that do all you can to eliminate abusive and neglectful programs while also doing whatever is necessary to preserve options for children and families in need of specialized treatment and educational services. Treatment is the greatest tool we have in the fight against addiction. I am proof that there is hope and that recovery is able to breed success and triumph. If you would like more information on my experience, you may contact me at any time. Once again, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this extraordinarily important hearing.

Respectfully submitted,

[REDACTED]

Attachment 2

U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor
Written Testimony of Thomas and Emily Vitale
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917-882-9256

Chairman Miller and Honorable Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to share our testimony with you. Chairman Miller, we share your urgent desire to ensure that abusive and neglectful “boot camps” and “tough love” programs do not harm adolescents in need of special care and nurturing.

However, most therapeutic schools and programs do provide healthy, positive environments in which children may learn while healing. Our daughter Caroline is one child who benefited greatly from a therapeutic boarding school. She had been in and out of many “regular” high schools, never able to get her homework done (she is extraordinarily bright so teachers assumed she was lazy). As she spiraled into depression and self-injury, we realized she needed a school where she would be both safe and able to work on the issues that caused her to de-rail.

Caroline spent 18 months at the King George School, an emotional growth boarding school in Northern Vermont. During that time she attended academic classes, excelled in therapeutic art classes, participated in group and individual therapy sessions. At no time was she or any student there forced to participate in programs like those which you aim to eliminate. Her experience there has changed her life and ours. She is currently back at a “regular” high school and is applying to college for next year. She would never have been able to do this without the support and nurturing of the King George School.

Certainly, you must eliminate abusive and neglectful programs. You must also preserve options for children and families in need of specialized treatment and educational services.

If you would like more information on our family’s experience, or better yet, if you would like to hear from our daughter, Caroline, please contact us.

Attachment 3

Committee on Education and Labor
Testimony of Alexandrine Lyons-Boyle

October 10, 2007

Chairman Miller and Honorable Committee Members, I sincerely applaud your desire to ensure that abusive and neglectful "boot camps" and "tough love" programs are not able to harm children who need therapy and care, and need to get on the right track. I've seen news programs that horrified me regarding these programs.

However, I sent my daughter to a wilderness therapy program that was not a boot camp, not a tough love program, but was an outstanding therapeutic program that saved her life.

My daughter had always been a happy child, a good student, and a sweet daughter until she reached high school. At that time, for many reasons, including depression, ADD, and the innate meanness of many teenage girls (the way "her friends" treated her would make you cry), she began to abuse drugs. She was so depressed that she would lie on our kitchen floor and just cry. She went from being an A-B student in high level classes (honors and advanced grades), to receiving straight F's, and being told by the high school principal that they were processing her to have her removed from the school. She was arrested repeatedly.

When I learned of Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy from her psychiatrist, I immediately sent her to this program. She spent 3 weeks hiking in the wilderness with 5 other teenagers, and 3 adults--two of the adults were trained counselors, and one a licensed therapist. All operated in close contact with a licensed therapist back in the home office who was in constant contact with the parents. These were wonderful, caring people, who, through their program, changed my daughter's life.

They taught her self-reliance and self confidence (she had to cook for herself, set up her own tent at night, and carry her own supplies during the day). She is proud of what she did. They structured all conversation so the kids couldn't just trade war stories, but had to really think about why they had made the decisions they had made, what they wanted from life, what their values were, and were they living by those values? How had they affected the people in their lives? What was their future going to be like? For 24 hours a day, every day for 3 weeks, my daughter was in therapy--caring, educational, and successful therapy. She was also in the healing environment of nature, which is awesome and cannot be duplicated indoors.

After only 3 weeks, she was a changed person. The last day, when she walked into the room where her family was waiting, she had a huge smile on her face, she looked tanned, a bit heavier, much healthier; she looked confident and proud of herself, and happy! I was amazed! She was proud of all she'd accomplished, of how she'd changed, and she was looking so forward to sharing her experiences with her family.

Much, much more amazing is how now, six months later, she is again an "A" student, a smiling, happy person, who has excellent values. In fact, she has an appreciation for life that she never had before.

She has thanked me many times for sending her to Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy. She changes her mind frequently now about what she will major in at college, but neither of us have any doubt that she will be a college graduate, a responsible member of society, and a good person.

I could give you much more detail, but in the interest of being brief, I will simply say that you are welcome to contact either my daughter or myself to learn more of the outstanding wilderness program she attended.

The people at Catherine Freer are very, very caring. They are NOTHING like I've seen on the news programs about the boot camps and tough love programs. *Please, please* do not lump them in with those other extremely scary, dangerous, and ineffective programs that harm children rather than helping them.

Thank you for protecting our youth from those harmful programs, and thank you for finding a way to differentiate the good from the bad in your legislation, and making sure programs like Catherine Freer continue to help children like my daughter.

Sincerely,

Alexandrine Lyons-Boyle
Mother of Leilagh Boyle
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Schaumburg, IL 60193
630-853-7183

Attachment 4

The National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs

Ethical Principles

Members of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs (NATSAP) provide residential, therapeutic, and/or education services to children, adolescents, and young adults entrusted to them by parents and guardians. The common mission of NATSAP members is to promote the healthy growth, learning, motivation, and personal well-being of our program participants. The objective of all our therapeutic and educational programs is to provide excellent treatment for our program participants; treatment that is rooted in good-hearted concern for their well-being and growth; respect for them as human beings; and sensitivity to their individual needs and integrity.

In applying to become or continue as a member of The National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, we agree to:

1. Be conscious of, and responsive to, the dignity, welfare, and worth of our program participants.
2. Honestly and accurately represent ownership, competence, experience, and scope of activities related to our program, and to not exploit potential clients' fears and vulnerabilities.
3. Respect the privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy of program participants within the context of our facilities and programs.
4. Be aware and respectful of cultural, familial, and societal backgrounds of our program participants.
5. Avoid dual or multiple relationships that may impair professional judgment, increase the risk of harm to program participants, or lead to exploitation.
6. Take reasonable steps to ensure a safe environment that addresses the emotional, spiritual, educational, and physical needs of our program participants.
7. Strive to maintain high standards of competence in our areas of expertise and to be mindful of our limitations.
8. Value continuous professional development, research, and scholarship.
9. Place primary emphasis on the welfare of our program participants in the development and implementation of our business practices.
10. Manage our finances to ensure that there are adequate resources to accomplish our mission.
11. Fully disclose to prospective candidates the nature of services, benefits, risks, and costs.
12. Provide informed, professional referrals when appropriate or if we are unable to continue service.

*As an executive of _____
a member program/program applying for membership with the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, I have signed below to indicate that our organization supports and follows the above Ethical Principles.*

Signature

Name (please print or type)

Title

Date