

NEWS TIMES

Sex, drug query hits group home in Cornelius

Police act after former Connell House resident levels complaints

BY CHRISTIAN GASTON

The Forest Grove News-Times, Apr 22, 2008, Updated Oct 30, 2009

Washington County detectives and state officials are investigating allegations of sexual and drug activity among residents of Connell House, the controversial group home in Cornelius.

The investigations come in the middle of statewide talks about procedures for siting facilities like the Connell House and a protracted legal bout between the City of Cornelius and Luke-Dorf, the nonprofit that runs the house, over the city's decision to revoke a conditional use permit for the facility.

The investigations began last week when Washington County Sheriff's deputies were called to the house, 117 N. 29th Ave., to transport a resident back to the Oregon State Hospital.

While deputies were transporting the patient to Salem on April 15, the man told them that he had cut his wrists in order to be returned to the state hospital because he didn't like being in Connell House.

He told deputies that his roommate:

- Repeatedly tried to persuade him to engage in anal sex;
- Engaged in sex with a female patient while he was in the room; and
- Snorted Vicodin in front of him, which upset the man because of his history with drug abuse.

The former resident's allegations rang alarm bells for the deputies transporting the man, said Sgt. David Thompson, spokesman for the Washington County Sheriff's office.

"We've got three pretty serious sex offenders in there," Thompson said, "So first of all they're thinking, 'Are these women in danger?' And the other part is, are they able to consent because of their mental status?"

Connell House is a secure residential treatment facility that houses eight patients on conditional release from the Oregon State Hospital, some of whom were found "guilty except for insanity" of crimes ranging from sex abuse to arson.

Four patients referred by Washington County's mental health office also reside in the house.

Thompson said deputies returned to the house later in the day and interviewed a number of residents, some of whom provided more details about the sexual relationships inside the house.

Luke-Dorf staffers said they were aware of one sexual relationship and had provided condoms to the residents involved.

Individual rules

Patients at the Oregon State Hospital are strongly discouraged from having sex with each other, but once they're released from the hospital, even though they are still housed in a locked facility, the rules are different.

Mary Claire Buckley, the executive director of the Psychiatric Security Review Board, which oversees patients on conditional release from the state hospital, said the board must balance the rights of the patients with the safety of the community at large.

"There is, at this point, no blanket prohibition against consenting adults in engaging in those relationships," Buckley said.

Washington County Sheriff Bob Corden said the situation is precarious, given the psychological state

"Is it even logical in a circumstance like this to have a co-educational facility?" Gordon asked. "My answer would be, 'Heck, no.'"

Buckley said that as soon as her agency heard about the investigation, the PSRB, along with Washington County's mental health office and the state department of addictions and mental health launched their own investigations.

Buckley said she expected the results of that probe this week. She said investigations such as the one at Connell House are rare.

Buckley said each patient under her board's care has an individualized care plan with conditions that must be met in order for them to remain in a community treatment center. Depending on what happens at the facility, that plan can change.

If there was any question about a patient's ability to consent because of a mental condition, the board might amend their conditional release plan.

"We would want the provider and the treating psychiatrist to assess the fact whether the individuals are capable of engaging in a consenting relationship," Buckley said.

Ken Palke, spokesman for the state Department of Human Services, said the state is examining whether men and women should cohabitate in secure residential treatment facilities.

Palke said he didn't know if the rule review was triggered by the investigation of the Connell House, but said it was an opportune time to address the issue.

"The investigation raises some questions and we need to be on top of that and make sure that we have answers for that," Palke said.

Difficult interviews

On Tuesday, Washington County Sheriff's detectives referred the case to the district attorney's office after additional attempts at interviewing Connell House residents were met with some resistance.

"Basically we're having a heck of a time trying to figure out if there's any criminal activity in there because the staff and the PSRB are throwing up roadblocks to our investigators," said Thompson.

Thompson said that on April 18, detectives returned to the Connell House to conduct follow-up interviews, but were met by a large group of Luke-Dorf staff and state and county officials, including Buckley.

Thompson said the detectives spent about 20 minutes outside "explaining to these folks that they needed to speak to the second female that's in there, that she's a potential victim."

But Buckley said it was up to Luke-Dorf to grant access to the patients inside the facility.

"How it works is that Luke-Dorf is the owner and operator of that facility and they first and foremost have say whether somebody has entry into that facility," Buckley said.

Bill Kabeiseman, an attorney representing Luke-Dorf, said that the legal issues involved are complex.

"Luke-Dorf is cooperating with the sheriff's office," he said. "The residents have a constitutional right to speak with the police officers or not. If a client doesn't want to talk to a police officer then Luke-Dorf can't force them to do that."

But Gordon says his officers need access to the facility to find out if anything happened at all, and what, if anything, should be done.

"We were getting some tremendous resistance to just finding out what's happening," Gordon said, "If we do believe that someone has been the victim of a crime in one of these places then law enforcement should have unfettered access to those people."

—Portland Tribune reporter Nick Budnick provided additional reporting for this article.