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Therapeutic Key Issue Summary

Protect adolescents and programs that serve young adults struggling with mental health by supporting legislation on licensure and standards of care.

IECA supports legislation that provides important oversight and sets standards for residential therapeutic schools and programs, while recognizing the critical role they play in providing effective treatment to children and adolescents dealing with significant mental health diagnoses, behaviors, substance abuse and emotional disabilities that have not been able to be effectively treated in their local communities.

We support federal legislation that would direct the Department of Health and Human Services to issue regulations establishing minimum standards of safety, care and staff training and implement a process to assure compliance.

Background:

In recent years, articulated by Paris Hilton among others, some adults have come forward with allegations of mistreatment or abuse in wilderness programs, residential treatment centers and therapeutic boarding schools in their past. Some have sought an over-reaction: to shut down all such programs, despite the demonstrated effectiveness of the vast majority of such programs.

Nearly all teens sent to residential therapeutic environments have exhausted all local resources of mental health treatment and their providers recommend a higher level of care. These children and adolescents are in danger of addiction, self-harm, failure to launch, arrested development and even incarceration unless such programs operate.

While national accrediting bodies exist and most state licensing boards provide supervision (and we endorse excluding from legislation programs accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Programs), such accreditation or licensing is not consistently true in all states. It is time for the federal government to create minimal standards of staff training and safety standards.

The Independent Educational Consultants Association has a highly specialized, vetted specialty within the membership, recognized as the leaders in helping families match their child's needs with expert knowledge, awareness, and review of the hundreds of program alternatives. Our support for federal legislation is paired with the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs which has called for similar legislative action.

The University of New Hampshire has conducted the most extensive study involving nearly 5,000 adolescents who were treated in therapeutic schools or programs. They found that 85% of those at-risk youth who entered a program with clinically significant disorders improved to a non-clinical range and showed improvement in their condition.

IECA endorses legislation that assures the safe and effective operation of therapeutic boarding schools, residential treatment centers, and wilderness-based programs, while assuring the safety of adolescents needing such care.