



October 11, 2007

U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), Chairman, House Education and Labor Committee

Representative Miller,

I am contacting you in response to yesterday's GAO report and your hearing on "boot camp" neglect and abuse cases. I represent the Association for Experiential Education (AEE), a nonprofit, professional membership association dedicated to experiential education and the students, educators and practitioners who utilize its philosophy. I believe we have resources and expertise to help with your on-going investigation and work to prevent such abuses.

Included under our umbrella are programs that use adventure-based practice and the philosophy of experiential education therapeutically within the fields of health, mental health, corrections, education and other human service fields. It does not, however, include programs like those described in the hearing yesterday. Such programs operate in ways that are contrary to the purpose of adventure therapy or wilderness therapy, and the incidents described are the result of practices that are prohibited by the accreditation standards and detailed best practices of this field. We concur that the safety and well being of our young people is paramount. It is the aim of AEE and other wilderness therapy and adventure therapy organizations to help parents, the public, and policy makers distinguish programs that are committed to safe and quality programming.

The major findings in yesterday's GAO report – untrained staff, lack of adequate nourishment, and inappropriate operating procedures and safety guidelines – are completely unacceptable in the AEE standards. AEE has been accrediting programs, including adventure therapeutic programs, for 14 years. The standards were developed by experts in the adventure programming field and are continuously updated with collaboration with outside resources and experts. Our Therapeutic Adventure Professional Group has a detailed set of Best Practices that complements the accreditation standards. We can be a valuable resource for any legislation that may be proposed.

I would also recommend accessing the expertise of NATSAP (National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs) and OBHIC (Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Industry Council), both of which were developed in response to deaths like those cited in the GAO report. Many of our professionals and programs are involved with these organizations also.

The Association of Experiential Education has been providing resources for educators and practitioners since 1974. Based in Boulder, Colorado, AEE has over 1400 members in 50 countries around the world. For further information, please contact Patricia Hammond, CEO executive@aee.org or Henry Wood, Director of Accreditation accreditation@aee.org.

Sincerely,

Pat Hammond, CEO