

Date: October 16, 2007

TO: Congressman George Miller

RE: Residential Treatment Programs

I am writing to you in response to the Government Accountability Office testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor on Residential Treatment Programs. I do so as the Chair of the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) Accreditation Council. The AEE Accreditation Council shares the concerns expressed in the report about the safety of children and other participants in certain programs for troubled youth. I write specifically to inform you about accreditation standards developed and monitored by the Accreditation Council of the AEE that address these concerns. Accreditation Council members are leaders throughout the field of experiential education. At this time, the Council consists of 13 members both from accredited and non-accredited organizations, three of which are affiliated with adventure therapy programs (Santa Fe Mountain Center, Red Top Meadows, and Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Programs). It is our hope that in addition to providing you with copies of the Manual of Accreditation Standards for Adventure Programs and our Policy and Procedures Manual, the AEE Accreditation Program can offer your deliberations a perspective that may be helpful.

The AEE has been involved with establishing and forwarding industry preferred practices since 1978. In 1992, in response to a rapid increase in adventure programs, AEE established the Accreditation Council, whose mission it is to inform and educate the public, protect the integrity of the field by advancing acceptable, prudent standards of practice, and make reasonable assessments of organizations conducting a range of adventure programming.

The current standards are published in the 4th edition of the Manual of Accreditation Standards for Adventure Programs, a copy of which is enclosed. These standards state criteria for assessment and provide organizations with guidance for improving practice. Both the Manual of Accreditation Standards for Adventure Programs and Administrative Practices of Accredited Programs are available for purchase through the AEE. To date, more than 600 copies of the Manual have been purchased, demonstrating the impact the AEE Accreditation Program has in the greater adventure programming field.

At this time, accreditation through AEE is a voluntary means of self-assessment and regulation for organizations meeting the eligibility criteria stated in the Accreditation Program Policy and Procedures Manual (also enclosed). Currently, 46 programs are accredited, 12 of which are therapeutic programs. All AEE accredited programs are monitored by the Accreditation Council for compliance with standards in the areas of concern to the Committee on Education and Labor.

The AEE Accreditation Program standards-based evaluation process by independent reviewers has become an accepted level of professional evaluation for adventure programs. While AEE accreditation standards provide a comprehensive assessment of an

organization's policy and procedures, noteworthy in regards to the concerns before your Committee are chapters in the standards manual related to philosophical, educational, and ethical principles; program management, operations, and oversight; and the conduct of technical skills that are land or water-based. Within these chapters are specific standards that relate to areas of risk management; staff selection, hiring, training, and supervision; and equipment, nutrition, and hygiene. Several cases cited in the testimony before your Committee refer to facts and circumstances that are addressed in the AEE accreditation standards.

The report before your Committee notes that it is not possible to generalize the results of this investigation as applying to all residential treatment programs, whether privately or publicly funded. The AEE Accreditation Council agrees that the concerns stated in the report cannot be generalized to all residential treatment programs. The authors of the report also state that it is difficult to obtain an overall picture of the extent of the residential treatment program industry and that many regulatory or licensing programs are distinguished on the basis of public/private ownership and are based on how an organization chooses to describe itself in marketing materials (p. 2, GAO Report). The AEE Accreditation Program does not evaluate eligibility or compliance with standards on the basis of ownership or program type (other than adventure programming). The detailed application process and internal review by the organization seeking accreditation requires the interpretation and application of standards according to the unique programmatic context in which the organization functions. AEE standards indicate the level at which responsible and prudent organizations and professionals operate in the field of adventure programming. Therefore, adventure therapy programs are distinguished on the basis of compliance with standards, rather than ownership or the type of adventure therapy program.

Thank you for your time and consideration of the Association for Experiential Education Accreditation Program in the matters before the committee. Please feel free to contact me directly at jude.hirsch@gcsu.edu or 478-445-4072 (office) or 478-445-4528112 (home).

Regards,

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Chair of the Association for Experiential Education Accreditation Council