

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/nyregion/hawthorne-cedar-knolls-sex-trafficking-victims.html?action=click&contentCollection=U.S.&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article>

How Do You Care for Sex-Trafficking Victims if You Can't Hold On to Them?

By NIKITA STEWART
DEC. 6, 2017



Hawthorne Cedar Knolls is a rehabilitation center in Westchester County that is home to many children who have been trafficked for sex. Residents at Hawthorne go missing at a significantly higher rate than those in similar programs. Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

MOUNT PLEASANT, N.Y. — Nearly every day, a teenager is missing from Hawthorne Cedar Knolls, a rehabilitation center for emotionally troubled children that sits on a sprawling campus in this Westchester County town.

Home to many young people who have been trafficked for sex, Hawthorne is supposed to help heal them and head off their return to prostitution and exploitation. But the center, run by a nonprofit group and intended to be a relatively open facility, has seen girl after girl, most of them from New York City, go missing.

People who have worked in child welfare in and around New York City say there is a pipeline from centers like the ones here back to the streets, where children fall prey to the abuse that they were supposed to escape. Over the last 18 months, the state, which oversees residential treatment centers like Hawthorne, stopped sending children to Hawthorne and to the nearby Pleasantville Cottage School. Among the 51 centers statewide, Hawthorne and Pleasantville are the only ones to have faced such severe sanctions over missing children in recent years.

By design and by law, conditions at residential treatment centers are less restrictive than those at many of the other programs for children with severe mental health problems. Residential treatment centers are not juvenile detention centers, and they are supposed to provide a homelike experience. Children cannot be locked down, and older children are encouraged to attend programs outside the campus and hold part-time jobs as part of their rehabilitation. But people

who work with the residents said that a lack of rigorous, engaging programs, especially for victims of sex trafficking, had made their open atmosphere a liability.

Hawthorne was recently drawn into a trafficking investigation after a teenage girl who went missing from Hawthorne ended up in the Bronx with a 25-year-old man.

The man has been charged with sex trafficking, rape, prostitution and other crimes in a state case involving the girl, and he has been charged as a conspirator in a federal investigation of a [Bronx drug-trafficking ring](#).

Prosecutors have not accused Hawthorne or its staff of any wrongdoing in connection with sex trafficking. But the involvement of a runaway from Hawthorne in the Bronx case underscored the challenges confronting such programs and the risks faced by some of the girls who are in them.

The investigation offers a glimpse into an underworld in which exploitation is hard to document and prosecute. Victims often fear retribution or are wary of law enforcement and refuse to cooperate with investigations, according to lawyers and social workers. But the exploitation is real, said Paul Oliva, the police chief in Mount Pleasant. “We had these girls leaving campus, hooking up with their pimps,” he said.



A security guard booth at Hawthorne Cedar Knolls. Credit Bryan anselm for The New York Times

Instead of escaping sexual exploitation, some teenagers are recruited by their peers inside centers and group homes, said Ed Gavin, a former acting chief of staff at the [Administration for Children's Services](#) in New York City. A piece of the pipeline in the region flows north to south, from the leafy, idyllic surroundings here to gritty “trap houses” run by twentysomething drug dealers, Mr. Gavin said. “People think of human trafficking as foreign. Human trafficking goes on right in the neighborhood. It goes on in the Bronx,” said Mr. Gavin, who now works as a private investigator and specializes in finding missing children.

The girls at Hawthorne, who range in age from 12 to 21, have been sent there through the recommendations of child welfare agencies, Family Court judges and a special education panel.

The majority of the children return to their homes or are sent to a foster home or other setting closer to their families in less than a year, said David Rivel, the chief executive of the [Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services](#), which operates Hawthorne.

Many children continue to run until they feel safe at the center, he said. "Kids are not running away from the campus, they are running away from the trauma and abuse they have experienced, which we are encouraging them to face," Mr. Rivel said.

To prevent children from regressing, there must be a balance between tough love and tolerance of behavioral problems that stem from deep-seated pain, said Jonathan McLean, the director of Hawthorne.

The town of Mount Pleasant has long been home to Hawthorne and Pleasantville, which is run by the [J.C.C.A.](#), formerly known as the Jewish Child Care Association.

About two miles apart, the campuses opened more than a century ago to take in the orphaned children of Jewish immigrants.

About 80 young people children live at Pleasantville, while about 50 live at Hawthorne. The overwhelming majority of the residents there are black and Hispanic children from New York City.



Jonathan McLean is the director at Hawthorne Cedar Knolls. To prevent children from regressing, Mr. McLean said, there must be a balance between tough love and tolerance of behavioral problems that stem from deep-seated pain. Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

In an interview, an 18-year-old at Gateways, a program on Pleasantville's campus for trafficked children, said she "sold her body for money," new clothes, trips to the nail salon and food.

“I always have this thing where I bounce my way into stuff and bounce my way into this,” the teenager said. “It’s hard to explain why people do it or why you do it.”

The teenager said she had enjoyed a visit by local volunteers who brought Jamaican food, cupcakes and pumpkins, but she said she wished some of the staff members were more empathetic. “Be more open and understanding of behaviors. Don’t shut us out,” she said.

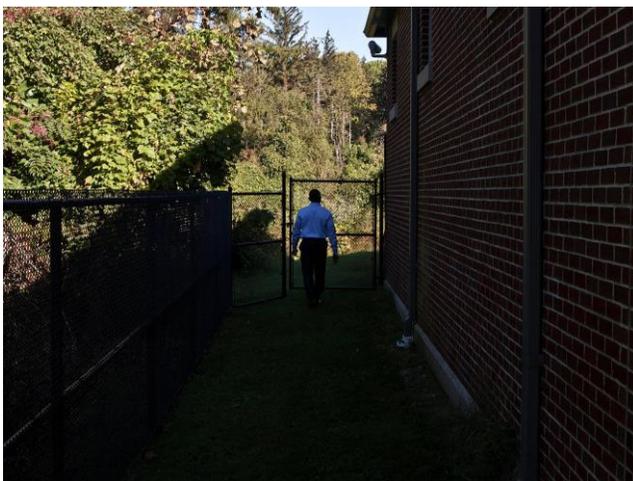
Making children feel wanted is key to preventing them from going missing, said Jim Purcell, the chief executive of the [Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies](#), an advocacy group. “For some of these kids, it’s showing that someone cares,” he said. “Some of these kids AWOL to see if somebody is going to stop them.”

Chief Oliva said his department, which has 45 officers, was stretched thin by helping to investigate sex trafficking cases involving missing girls, and by responding to calls from the centers and complaints from residents.

To push the nonprofits to improve security, the town began charging them a fine of \$250 last year for calls about missing children, he said. (As of October, the town had issued the fine 15 times.) The fines were instituted in part because residents had complained about crimes committed by children from the centers, but Mr. Oliva said it was important to remember that the children were being hurt or put in harm’s way.

From July 2016 through June, about 73 percent of the 188 New York City children at Hawthorne were reported missing, a rate that was significantly higher than those for similar programs.

Mr. Rivel said the numbers at Hawthorne had been skewed by the “overreporting” of cases in which children had gone missing for just a few hours, but he did not dispute that the numbers reflected a crisis and that elected officials needed to help. “We have a real problem here, a real challenge here,” he said.



Mr. McLean walked toward a newly built security fence at Hawthorne that stretches 200 feet through trees and brush. Credit Bryan anselm for The New York Times

Last year, the Jewish Board and J.C.C.A. hired directors of security, new positions for both nonprofits.

At Pleasantville, the J.C.C.A. added more cameras, new lighting and new two-way radios. At Hawthorne, the Jewish Board began following children in a van on the 20-minute walk from the campus to the nearby Metro-North Railroad station. The board also installed a six-foot-high fence that stretches 200 feet through trees and brush.

The tactics have reduced the number of children who go missing, though the figure remains strikingly high at Hawthorne. Since the state allowed Hawthorne to begin accepting new residents in August, about 54 percent of the 79 New York City children living there have been absent at some point, according to city data.

But the idea of using highly restrictive security measures is at odds with a strong belief by many experts that emotionally damaged children should not be criminalized.

“Honestly, their goal is to protect these kids,” said Staca Shehan, the executive director of the case analysis division at the [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#). “But at the end of the day, there hasn’t been a way to force services upon them,” she said. “The field as a whole really doesn’t have a consensus because running away from services is so prevalent.”

Advocates said there was a need for more state funding for programs that engage children. “Those are the things that get lost in the shuffle when there’s no money,” Mr. Purcell said.

Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi, a Queens Democrat who is the chairman of the social services committee, said Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, a Democrat, has cut the operating budgets of the agencies that oversee troubled children by nearly 17 percent since fiscal 2012 to keep a vow to curb state spending.

The state described the cuts as “cost savings” unrelated to the direct funding of treatment centers.

The state provides money to local districts that negotiate annual rates with the nonprofit organizations that run the centers — the Jewish Board receives \$419.78 per day for each child, and the J.C.C.A. receives \$431.36. The state could set higher rates for the next fiscal year because of the cost of the new security measures at Hawthorne and Pleasantville, state officials said.

A version of this article appears in print on December 7, 2017, on Page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: 2 Homes for Sex-Trafficking Victims Struggle to Keep Residents Safe.