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State forces teen mothers to move from shelter

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Tuesday, September 26, 2006

By **BARBARA WILLIAMS** and **ELAINE D'AURIZIO**
STAFF WRITERS



The Record

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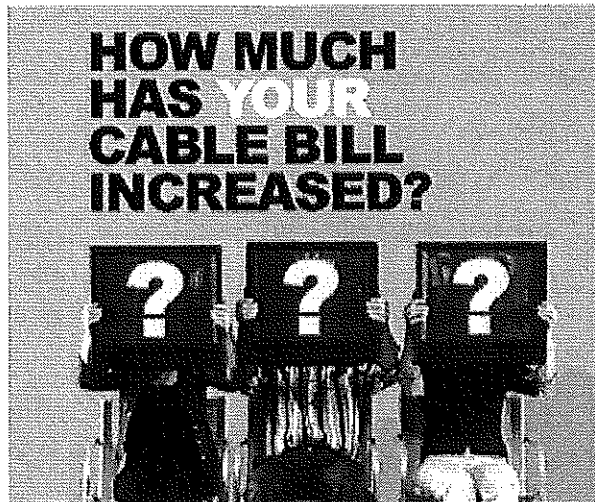
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WEST MILFORD -- About two dozen teenage girls, some of them mothers and all under state supervision, have been removed from a local women's shelter after a mix-up by the state agency aiding them.

Friends and shelter workers were visibly shaken Monday as the forced exodus from Strengthen Our Sisters continued. First removed on Friday were 15 young mothers and their babies. Seven teenagers without children were taken by social workers to other locations. At least four more are also scheduled to move.

A spokeswoman for the state Department of Children and Families, created in July as part of a reorganization of state agencies, said the state is moving the teens for their own protection. Mary Helen Cervantes said the shelter is not licensed to house children 17 and younger who are under state supervision.

The agency mistakenly placed them there and is now rectifying the error and putting the children in facilities that have state approval, Cervantes said.



But the event nevertheless prompted sharp criticism among SOS staff about

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upsetting the security and tranquility the teenagers had found at the shelter.

"These children were all functioning and doing well and were ripped away without any incident," said Sandra Ramos, director of SOS. "Some of them have been here for 2½ years; some of the babies were born in the shelter."

For several years, the shelter -- predominantly a haven for battered women and their children -- has been taking in teenagers placed by the state agency. Eight SOS locations house 171 women and children, including the state placements. SOS received \$75 per day for each teenager and \$75 for her baby.

"We have a contract for the shelter to house those older than 17 with babies, but when we realized we had adolescents who were younger than that, we had to move them," Cervantes said. "Then when we went there to move those adolescents, we saw there were some safety issues" that provided added reason for the transfers.

The safety issues concerned fire hazards, including not having an emergency exit in the multi-family facility. Stoppgap measures such as rope ladders and additional smoke detectors have been put in until the rest of the teenagers can be relocated, Cervantes said. A monitor also is on hand 24 hours a day in case an emergency arises, she said.

At the shelter Monday afternoon, handmade signs questioning the state's decision hung on the back door. Tears streamed down the girls' faces as they hugged each other and promised to come back. They helped each other carry their black plastic bags and suitcases down the steps and across the gravel driveway to waiting cars.

"The house is empty now; it's not the same without the girls," said one 17-year-old scheduled to leave soon.

Two distraught sisters couldn't believe they were going to be separated again. The 16-year-old was going to Irvington. Her older sibling's destination was unknown.

"I've been away from my family for three years; they took my baby away in February, and my sister and I just got together this summer," the 17-year-old sobbed. "I don't want to be separated from her and they said they won't tell me where I'm going until I get there."

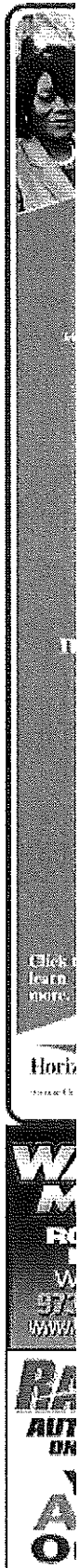
Ramos contends removing the teenagers is because of money. She said after she pressured the state for timely payments for the teenagers and babies, the state notified her it would be removing all the mothers 17 and under with babies.

But DCF spokesman Andy Williams said the issue had nothing to do with money. He noted that the Isaiah House in East Orange receives \$86 per client per day from the state.

"This is not about money," he said, "it's about the children being safe."

Glenda Kirkland, executive director of Isaiah House, did confirm that one teenager and her 6-week-old infant moved into the facility this weekend from SOS.

Another girl with her 10-month-old baby was sent to Eva's Village in Paterson. The destination of the other teenagers could not be determined.



"The girls were destroyed about leaving," said shelter volunteer Laurie Griffiths. "They loved it here, and many said the staff were like stepparents to them."

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SOS provides day care for the babies, as well as parenting and anger management classes. The teenagers attended local schools, and went on outings to museums and local cultural events.

Reflecting the feelings of the girls, one hand-printed sign left behind Monday said: "You took us from our real families, now you're taking us from our second home."

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