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A Times investigation | First of three parts

WHEN PARENTS TURN to “Christian” group homes for help with a troubled child, religion can be an excuse for abuse and secrecy. Teenagers have been shackled, beaten, hurt so badly they nearly died. The Bible offers cover for extreme discipline. Florida officials say they are powerless to stop it.

In God's name



THE FEAR OF GOD: A drill instructor escorts a young man in an orange jumpsuit at Gateway Christian Military Academy, also known as Teen Challenge, in Bonifay on Oct. 5. The jumpsuits single out newcomers — and rule breakers. Parents know this place is tough. It's why they choose it.

STORIES BY ALEXANDRA ZAYAS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHLEEN FLYNN • OF THE TIMES

When parents turn to “Christian” group homes for help with a troubled child, religion can be an excuse for abuse and secrecy. Teenagers have been shackled, beaten, hurt so badly they nearly died. The Bible offers cover for extreme discipline. Florida officials say they are powerless to stop it.

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They shaved him bald that first morning in 2008, put him in an orange jumpsuit and made him exercise past dark.

Through the night, as he slept on the floor, they forced him awake for more.

The sun had not yet risen over the Christian military home when Samson Lehman collapsed for the sixth time. Still, he said, they made him run.

The screaming, the endless exercise, it was all in the name of God, a necessary step at the Gateway Christian Military Academy on the path to

righteousness.

So when Samson vomited, they threw him a rag. When his urine turned red, they said that was normal.

By Day 3, the 15-year-old was on the verge of death, his dehydrated organs shutting down.

Slumped against a wall, cold and immobile, Lehman recalls men who recited Scripture calling him a wimp. And he thought: Maybe, if I die here, someone will shut this place down.

Not in Florida.

In this state, unlicensed religious homes can abuse children and go on operating for years. Almost 30 years ago, Florida legislators passed a law eliminating state oversight of children's homes that claim government rules hamper their religious practices.

Today, virtually anyone can claim a list of religious ideals, take in children and subject them to

punishment and isolation that verge on torture - so long as they quote chapter and verse to justify it.

The Tampa Bay Times spent a year investigating more than 30 religious homes that have housed children in recent years across Florida. Some operate with a religious exemption, legally regulated by a private Christian organization instead of the state. Others lost their exemption and operate with no legal accreditation at all.

Although most drew few complaints, nearly a dozen have been hounded by allegations of abuse. A review of thousands of pages of investigative files and interviews with dozens of former residents found:

- State authorities have responded to at least 165 allegations of abuse and neglect in the past decade, but homes have remained open even after the state found evidence of sex abuse and physical injury.

- The religious exemption has for decades allowed homes to avoid state restrictions on corporal punishment. Homes have pinned children to the ground for hours, confined them in seclusion for days, made them stand until they wet themselves and exercised them until they vomited.

- Children have been bruised, bloodied and choked to unconsciousness in the name of Christian discipline. A few barely escaped with their lives. In addition, in two settled lawsuits, a mother said her son was forced to hike on broken feet; a father said his son was handcuffed, bound at the feet, locked away for three days and struck by other boys at the instruction of the home.

- Adults have ordered children to participate in the punishment, requiring them to act as jailers, to bully troublemakers or to chase, tackle and sit on their peers.

- Teens have been denounced as sinners, called “faggots” and “whores,” and humiliated in front of their peers for menstrual stains and suspicions of masturbation.

- Parents share the blame. Some sign away their children for a year or more without first visiting a home or checking credentials. But state officials bear some responsibility because they have not warned the public about programs they believe are abusive.

- Florida taxpayers have supported some unlicensed homes with hundreds of thousands of dollars in McKay scholarships - a government program to help special needs students pay tuition at private schools.

In Florida, the vast majority of children’s homes are regulated and inspected by the state Department of Children and Families. But under Florida law, a home can shield itself from that oversight by claiming a religious exemption.

Instead of state-trained child safety workers, these homes are regulated by the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a private, nonprofit group run almost entirely by the same people who run the homes.

FACCCA executive director Buddy Morrow said his organization condemns extended isolation,



A SURVIVOR: Samson Lehman, with girlfriend Alayna Stitely at his side, plays a video game at his Gainesville home June 13. Lehman nearly died after extreme exercise at Gateway Academy.

humiliation and the shackling of children. He also said the association aggressively monitors homes for abusive practices, but he refused to provide copies of inspection reports and other documentation.

In response to the Times investigation, he expects his board will strengthen restrictions on corporal punishment, limit seclusion and ban shackling.

Morrow would not talk about specific homes, but he said his association has revoked or refused to renew accreditation for at least three homes since 2005. Some continued to operate - without a state license or a religious exemption - the Times found.

At least four religious homes are accepting children without any legally recognized credentials. Foster children in state care have been illegally placed in at least two of those homes, the Times discovered.

In response, DCF officials have launched a state-wide review to identify rogue children’s homes and any state-dependent children who have been placed in them.

More must be done, says Robert Friedman, a psychologist and professor emeritus with the University of South Florida’s Department of Child and Family Studies. Friedman founded an advocacy group to stop abuse in residential facilities and has given congressional testimony on the topic.

“For us not to be able to regulate these programs,” he said, “for us not to be able to provide the oversight of these programs that’s needed is just shameful.

“We don’t know even the scope of the problem, and we allow these youngsters behind these closed doors.”

Religious homes

For years the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies has listed its primary address as 2603 SW Brim St., a three-bedroom house in Lake City.

The agency’s two full-time employees and two part-timers must process new applications and fan out across the state to monitor and investigate more than 20 Christian child care facilities.

Every year, association officials say, they check

on the nearly 700 girls and boys whose parents have placed them in the homes. Many parents come to the homes in desperation, hoping religion or strict discipline can get their child off drugs or correct severe emotional problems.

“They’ve been through state-supported or state programs. None of the programs have worked for them,” said Doug Smith, a former board member who runs Safe Harbor Maritime Academy with his wife. “And for some of these children, this is a last resort.”

Parents who can afford it pay tuition that can reach \$20,000 a year or more. Some must take out loans, dip into college funds, or accept scholarships provided by the homes. In addition, the state has paid more than \$600,000 in McKay money to parents for use at FACCCA-accredited homes.

In Florida alone, unlicensed religious homes collected at least \$13 million in 2010, according to available IRS filings.

Most of the homes pay a small portion of that income for membership in the Christian association. Those members get to vote on whether new programs will be granted a religious exemption.

Association leaders say they spend months vetting new homes. They visit multiple times and review a home’s policies. They also are required by law to run a criminal background check on all employees. The head of the home must have at least a high school diploma and a few years’ experience running a home.

There is no litmus test to determine whether a home is truly guided by religion. Morrow said FACCCA officials use their own judgment to determine that during inspections.

In the end, the association has a reason to stringently monitor its homes, officials said.

“We are here to help kids and our reputation of not helping kids hurts us all,” Smith said. “So we’re pretty reluctant to take someone that we’re not really confident in. If we get a home that gets a black eye, we all get a black eye.”

A pattern of abuse

The Department of Children and Families takes complaints made against unlicensed religious homes when someone calls Florida’s child abuse hotline. And it sends workers to investigate potential abuse and neglect.

But in the nearly 30 years since Florida began allowing religious exemptions, state officials have never tallied up how much abuse was occurring at the homes they stopped regulating.

The Times, in the first effort of its kind, requested public records noting abuse complaints for homes currently or formerly accredited by FACCCA. It also reviewed emergency dispatch records, police reports and court records.

The records show authorities have been called to the homes hundreds of times over the past decade for everything from runaways to suicide threats to child abuse allegations.

DCF alone has conducted at least 165 investigations into the mistreatment of children.



BOOTS AND BIBLES: Boys dressed in camouflage read from their Bibles during a church service at Gateway Academy in Bonifay on Oct. 5.

Its investigators found evidence to support allegations in more than a third of those cases - 63 incidents at 17 homes with a list of offenses that include physical injury, medical neglect, environmental hazards, threatened harm, bizarre punishment, inadequate supervision, mental injury, asphyxiation and sexual abuse.

Among the cases DCF “verified:” a 16-year-old girl in Orlando pressured to perform oral sex on a counselor she considered a father figure; a 15-year-old boy in Punta Gorda forced to lie face-down in the dirt for three hours as a 220-pound counselor lay on top of him; and a 16-year-old boy in Port St. Lucie, shackled for 12 days and berated by staff with racial slurs.

Extreme discipline

The most troubled programs are easy to see.

Of the 30 facilities reviewed by the Times, half had never been investigated by the state for abuse or neglect, and others had only a few, unsubstantiated allegations.

Seven facilities account for two-thirds of abuse hotline complaints over the past decade. Among them: Gateway Christian Military Academy, Camp Tracey near Jacksonville, Anderson Academy in Vero Beach, Southeastern Military Academy in Port St. Lucie and Lighthouse of Northwest Florida in Jay.

Several others, including New Beginnings Girls Academy, have few hotline complaints but show up in Internet message boards and “survivor” groups.

Jamie Lee Schmude said she was 16 when her parents sent her to New Beginnings to stop her drinking and pot smoking.

She recounts extreme punishments, including being forced to stand in one place so long she urinated on herself.

One day in 2003, she’d had enough. When she was made to stand at a wall for a deed she doesn’t remember, she gave up and sat.

She said girls were ordered to take her to the preacher, who made them pin her to the ground

as his wife unhooked a thin plastic rod from the blinds.

The wife started swinging.

“It didn’t matter where she hit me,” Schmude recalled. “I had bruises all over my butt and my lower back and my upper legs.”

Two others told the Times they were forced to witness it all, made to hold her down as she wailed on the filthy floor, then made to sing once it was over: Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...

Officials with New Beginnings Girls Academy did not respond to a phone call, emails or a letter sent by the Times. The home, which left Florida voluntarily in 2007, was last investigated in 2006 on allegations of sexual abuse. State officials found no evidence to support the claim, records show.

On the other side of the state, 16-year-old Cody Livingston found himself at Camp Tracey, a fundamentalist Baptist reform program on the rural outskirts of Jacksonville.

When Livingston got caught smoking cigarettes, they made him eat one. When he cursed, they made him swallow two spoonfuls of citrus-scented liquid soap, he said. “If I didn’t do it, then I didn’t get to eat that night.”

But that paled in comparison to what he says happened when he got caught engaging in sexual activity with other boys in 2008.

They told him his mother didn’t want him. They shaved his head. They made him carry two 5-gallon buckets of dirt everywhere he went, and at night, run laps around the dorm with a tire tied to his waist. They let him speak to no one but staff, and only if he was spoken to first, and they made him sleep on the floor of a mudroom for a week or more, giving him a bucket to use as a toilet.

“We got sprayed down with a water hose for our shower,” Livingston said. “They made it very clear that we were not human; we were subhuman pieces of trash.”

Officials at Camp Tracey declined to speak with a Times reporter.

Opening the gate

Florida became a magnet for unlicensed religious homes in the mid 1980s, when a small group of preachers teamed up with a powerful Florida legislator and a lobbyist to successfully press for a law that exempted them from state control.

Now, the homes answer to FACCCA instead of state regulators.

By law, FACCCA standards of child care must be in “substantial compliance” with the state’s. But the state has not made sure the association’s rules keep up with current standards.

DCF officials could find no evidence of an agency review of FACCCA rules since 1984. They asked the Christian association for a copy of its corporal punishment guidelines only after the Times began asking questions earlier this year.

David Wilkins, DCF’s top administrator, said it is not the state’s responsibility to review the association’s standards unless they change.

“I don’t believe the statute tells us we ought to

be going out and regulating them,” Wilkins said. “They provide us their standards, and we review those. Quite frankly, it hasn’t been reviewed in years.”

Held side-by-side in 2012, there are significant differences between the rule books.

The state requires a doctor’s order to shackle children. FACCCA does not.

The state bans spanking and severely limits the time children can be held in isolation. FACCCA does not.

State-licensed facilities cannot punish children by withholding communication with parents and must guarantee kids access to an abuse hotline.

FACCCA officials say children can report abuse, but former students said they had no way. They can be denied access to a phone for any reason.

Experts say this is a recipe for trouble.

Jack Levine, who has a master’s degree in child and family development and for 25 years served as president of a statewide network of advocates called Voices for Florida’s Children, opposed the exemption back in 1984.

He still does.

“The great fertile ground for abuse and neglect is isolation,” Levine said. “If you are isolated and don’t have an avenue to express what you know, what you see, that promises further problems.”

In 1984, mainstream religious organizations, including Catholic Community Services, Southern Baptist Child Care Executives and others across the state, lined up to try to stop the exemption from becoming law. They echoed concerns from child advocates who predicted it would open the door to extremists.

“Any weirdo, any charlatan who has been kicked out of some other state could come into Florida and say, ‘I’m a religious facility and I don’t want to be licensed,’” Hugh Forsyth, director of a licensed girls’ program in St. Petersburg, predicted to the Times in 1984.

“They just decide they’re going to have a child care facility and away they go. There’s nothing to stop them.”

Ordained by God

New Beginnings was the kind of children’s home FACCCA was created to regulate. Its founder was Lester Roloff, a Baptist radio preacher among the first to use religion as a shield against the licensing of a reform home.

The subject of repeated abuse allegations over several decades, the program left Texas for good in 2001 when that state’s Legislature decided religious homes were no longer exempt from licensing.

It settled in a Panhandle city called Pace and remained there until 2007.

At New Beginnings, teenage girls got a heavy dose of strict Christianity. They were forbidden to wear pants or hear news of the outside world or even make eye contact with crowds when they toured churches in the summer.

Brittany Campbell arrived at the home in 2001.

Her sister enrolled her, Campbell said, after the 15-year-old smoked pot for the first time and

began dating girls.

She recalls Pastor Bill McNamara's introduction during the first sermon.

"He just looked right at me from the platform, ran at me, and all these girls jumped out of the way," Campbell remembers. "And he jumps, like, onto the pew in front of me and then bent down at his waist and told me I was a 'faggot.' 'God's not going to bless a bunch of faggots.'"

The Times interviewed nine women who attended the home in Florida from 2001 to 2007.

They say their menstrual-stained underwear was waved around to chastise them for being unclean and recall being timed when they went to the bathroom and rationed squares of toilet paper based on what they disclosed they needed to do. They remember being awakened in the night, as the preacher stormed into their dorm, screaming that the room stank and he could "smell masturbation."

"Every time he said it, I would just cringe," recalls Anni Leigh Smith, now 26.

Reporting abuse? Unlikely, former residents said.

New Beginnings, like many other unlicensed homes, monitored all phone conversations.

Several former New Beginnings residents said they were scared to speak out and were intimidated by adults at the home about talking to investigators.

Campbell said she witnessed the whipping of Jamie Schmude. She said before DCF came asking questions, she was coached by the stout, fiery McNamara.

"He would play that sort of thing from a classic cult angle," Campbell said. "Related them (investigators) to Satan.... 'These people don't know what we do here. The world doesn't support God's way'..."

"We were under his authority, as ordained by God."

Today, the women have a 130-member Facebook group called "Proactive Survivors of New Beginnings Girls Academy." In recent years, there has been online talk about the new children's home that moved in after New Beginnings left Florida for Missouri.

Newer Beginnings

Marvelous Grace Girls Academy now sits at the end of that long, clay driveway in Pace.

It is hard to tell where New Beginnings ends and Marvelous Grace begins.

The property has not been sold since its days under Pastor McNamara. It is still owned by a corporation that lists McNamara as an officer. And though the girls of New Beginnings recall moving to Missouri in 2007, back in Florida, police reports continued to call the home by the same name for years.

The home's website in 2009 called Steven Blankenship executive director for "New Beginnings Girls Academy." On that site, Blankenship - now director at Marvelous Grace - said he found God



PATH TO RIGHTEOUSNESS: A drill instructor crouches and prays with a boy during a church service at Gateway Academy in Bonifay on Oct. 5.

"after years of living as a Satanist and a Witch."

Another defunct site, truth4teens.org, showed photos of Blankenship preaching during radio broadcasts and revivals and listed his name under blog entries. The site called hatred "a family value."

It also showed what the site called a brain scan of a man hospitalized for voices in his head. The image contained a horned shape that the site suggested was the face of Satan caught by modern medical equipment. "It has been validated as authentic!" the site declared.

Marvelous Grace has no state license and is not accredited by FACCCA. DCF investigated an abuse allegation in 2010, finding no evidence.

Blankenship declined to be interviewed. In an email, he wrote: "Please do not call, email, text, send letter, or show up on Marvelous Grace Girls Academy's property."

He told the Times he will be accredited by January 2013.

Desperate for help

Not everyone calls the children who pass through an unlicensed home "survivors." Many see the homes as saviors, when all else has failed.

Parents from across the country gathered one recent Friday on a remote Panhandle property, the home of Gateway Christian Military Academy, also known as Teen Challenge, in Bonifay.

Dozens sat in folding chairs outside the children's home and applauded their sons, once drug-addicted and defiant, as they marched in camouflage and recited in perfect unison this passage from Hebrews:

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.

A handful of rule-breakers were not allowed to participate. They stood off to the side in faded orange jumpsuits.

The jumpsuits, some missing buttons and held together by duct tape, are also worn by new recruits in the first days when drill instructors get in their faces and make them exercise; it's what Samson Lehman had on when he was made to run until he almost died.

Parents assembled for the monthly visit know this place is tough. That's why they chose it.

Sabrina and Lane Stromsnes, registered nurses from Plant City, almost lost their 13-year-old son to a progression of drugs that culminated in crack.

The parents thought they had covered their bases. They drug tested their son, took him to a counselor, even sat behind him in school.

The decision to send him away became clear the night they found him running through the woods, nearly naked and out of his mind. They believe if they hadn't taken him to Gateway, he would be dead.

Now, they see their son healthy. They know he can't sneak out like he used to. He is sober, alive.

"I just hugged my son," the father said. "I kissed him. I told him I loved him. And I know that next May, I'll get him back."

During a nighttime service, as Christian rock played, boys overcome by emotion fell to their knees and cried. Drill instructors hugged them, held them and whispered prayers into their ears.

Despite such tender moments, instructors' rough tactics have brought DCF investigators into the Panhandle group home 24 times in its 14-year history, with allegations of bizarre punishment, beatings, physical injury and medical neglect.

DCF had verified such claims in five cases and found credible evidence of similar mistreatment in three others by 2008, when a woman dropped off a 15-year-old son she suspected had been drinking.

On the verge of death

Samson Lehman was a straight-A student enrolled in honors Algebra and English. He had no juvenile record, and his guidance counselor thought his friends were the "cream of the crop."

He said he was caught off-guard when men in camouflage patted him down, called him a mom beater and a drug addict and began a marathon of exercise that ended only when his body gave out.

Clammy. Pale. Changing colors. That's how staff members described Lehman's appearance more



CHAPTER AND VERSE: A sign near the driveway of Marvelous Grace Girls Academy in Pace quotes Scripture about grace and humility. Marvelous Grace has no state license and is not accredited by FACCCA.

than 24 hours before they drove him to the hospital, a Holmes County sheriff's report shows.

Four other boys watched him vomit repeatedly. Boys watched him fall during seemingly endless laps inside the barracks, and they watched staff restrain him.

Counselors offered him ibuprofen, which his doctor would later say can cause kidney damage in a dehydrated person. Then they waited an entire day before driving him to the hospital, a sheriff's report shows.

Emergency room tests showed Lehman's organs were shutting down. He was airlifted to an intensive care unit at Children's Hospital in Alabama, where his doctor described a "race for time."

"Waste products had accumulated to a dangerous extent," nephrologist Dr. Frank Tenney wrote in a letter to DCF that Lehman gave the Times. "Left untreated, his heart would certainly have stopped in a short time."

DCF investigated and listed the case as "verified medical neglect," finding a "preponderance of

credible evidence." But the State Attorney's Office in Holmes County did not pursue charges.

Pastor David Rutledge, director of the children's home, says Lehman's illness was the result of a young man arriving with mineral deficiencies. He points out the home now employs a registered nurse, has a doctor on its board and requires all incoming residents to pass a metabolic panel. He said boys are no longer forced to endure such long stretches of intense exercise.

Lehman is now 20 and majoring in engineering at the University of Florida.

He endured months of dialysis. Years of nightmares.

"The whole time, the thought is running through me, like, I don't deserve this, this sucks," Lehman said.

"You can't do anything as a child to protect yourself"

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report.

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FLORIDA'S BEST NEWSPAPER

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In God's name | Second of three parts

NO ONE IN FLORIDA MONITORS boarding schools, not even an unlicensed military-style program with a history of complaints and a penchant for “bizarre” punishment. Just ask the “colonel.”



THE PIT: Boys work out in a sand pit at Southeastern Military Academy, which abuts Florida's Turnpike in Port St. Lucie. The Christian minister who runs the program says he takes a “mind, body and soul” approach.

Bruised, but still standing

STORIES BY ALEXANDRA ZAYAS • PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN FLYNN • TIMES

Anyone can run a program that houses troubled children in Florida.

Even Alan Weierman.

In the past decade, state officials have investigated an unlicensed military program run by the self-titled “colonel” 24 times and found evidence that kids were punched, kicked, slammed into hard objects and choked to unconsciousness.

They know about a boy who left Weierman's home in 2004 on the verge of kidney failure.

And another boy who was shackled for 12 days in 2008 and called a “black monkey.”

They say Weierman, a Christian minister, has repeatedly crossed the line of abuse in his three decades running religious group homes in this state. Regulators have tried to shut him down.

The state license to operate his children's home lasted only two years.

Eight years ago, he lost a religious exemption that had allowed him to keep his reform home open without government oversight.

So now he operates without any state-recognized accreditation at all.

He has even had to answer allegations of sexual abuse and of failing to report abuse alleged by a girl at his facility.

The facility staff engage in discipline that is harmful, DCF officials wrote in a report four years ago.

The risk to children is high.

Yet his home is still open and caring for a dozen boys.

Still collecting \$28,600 per child from parents.

Still punishing kids in ways that trouble the state.

Easy to abuse

The story of Southeastern Military Academy exposes an ugly truth about Florida - you can get a license to open a group home, torment children for years and face few repercussions, so long as you are not convicted of a crime.

The Department of Children and Families can storm into licensed homes, order changes and remove children. But the department's ultimate weapon - revoking a home's license - is virtually meaningless.

Lose your state license and you can apply for a religious exemption. Lose that and you can register as a “boarding school.”

Each time, the process starts over. New regulators with different rules come to visit.

Each step down the regulatory ladder relaxes

the standards required of a children's home.

Or you can start out as a "boarding school" and skip the hassles of licensing and government oversight altogether.

State-licensed facilities are inspected by DCF; religious exempt homes are reviewed by a private, nonprofit agency with headquarters in Lake City.

No one in Florida monitors boarding schools, which are allowed three years to apply for accreditation by one of five organizations listed in statute. Those organizations focus largely on academics.

DCF investigators respond to abuse allegations at all children's homes. But for years they did not routinely verify whether those facilities had their required credentials. DCF officials said that's because state abuse investigators didn't understand the "intricacies of the law."

"That is not the duty of the DCF investigator," DCF spokeswoman Erin Gillespie said in April. "If anyone had any concerns that these homes were running illegally, they would have to report that to DCF and our licensing staff or legal team would investigate."

In response to the Times' investigation, DCF is now making sure abuse investigators check a facility's credentials.

But for years while DCF waited for the general public to make a complaint, homes fell through the cracks.

Southeastern Military Academy, which the state once took to court because it had no accreditation, has been operating without state-recognized oversight for years.

When asked about the academy earlier this year, a DCF spokesperson questioned whether the home remained open, hearing that the site "looked abandoned," with a "For Sale" sign outside.

The 'colonel'

Southeastern Military Academy abuts Florida's Turnpike on an unfenced property in Port St. Lucie where anyone can see boys sweat in a sand pit, counting exercises for a man in fatigues.

That man, 50-year-old Alan Weierman, is big and tall and wears his graying hair high and tight; "snow on top," he calls the style.

Smiling, drinking coffee in his combat boots, he has been up for five hours when he greets visitors at 9 a.m. on a recent Wednesday. He hands them a business card emblazoned with a U.S. Army logo and the title "colonel."

Weierman is not affiliated with any branch of the military. Nor has he ever been close to the rank of colonel. He says he tried to join the Army more than three decades ago but was dismissed after six weeks because he was allergic to bees.

"I'm not sorry where I'm at today," he said. "It all comes around to where you still get to serve. Training young men is like being in the military. It's like training soldiers all over again - kids with no respect for parents, no respect for police, or themselves."

Weierman says he instills that respect in the dozen boys in his care.

He takes in "recruits" as young as 11, strips them of individuality, dictates rules and nitpicks for



DISCIPLINE AND ORDER: Alan Weierman gives reporters a tour of the boys' bunks at Southeastern Military Academy in Port St. Lucie on Sept. 19. Weierman refers to himself as "colonel" but is not a member of the military.

infractions. When they break and lose control, he says, he builds them back up.

His program is not about "breaking down" kids or creating "robots," he says. It's about shaping behavior that will last. He says the "mind, body and soul" approach includes daily spiritual devotions, Sunday worship and accommodations for boys of other religions.

"It doesn't matter to me why he's here. It doesn't matter to me even what he thinks about being here," Weierman said. "He understands there is compliance. He must understand there are rules."

Weierman's program is built around discipline that would never be allowed at a state licensed home.

Parents sign a contract allowing corporal punishment and giving up the right to sue, even if their child dies.

Weierman says he hasn't had to shackle a boy in years, but reserves the right to do it when a boy presents a threat or tries to run away.

While the home has been accused by state child protection workers of abusive treatment, nothing has been proved to rise to criminal child abuse.

Still, even Weierman concedes there have been problems.

He stopped showing the war film Full Metal Jacket after he caught boys having "blanket parties," mimicking a scene in the movie where a recruit is gang-beaten with bars of soap, wrapped in towels.

Over the years, child abuse investigators have found dozens of children with minor injuries and classified the cases as maltreatment stemming from out-of-control disciplinary efforts.

Moving to Florida

Weierman scoffs at the idea that the harsh discipline doled out at his group home amounts to child abuse. He says he knows real abuse.

"My dad shot me when I was 13 years old, trying to kill me," he said. "I was ripped out of bed many nights and beaten bloody, simply because I failed to close a gate or shut a door."

He grew up hard in Ohio in the 1970s. By 17, he said, he had racked up criminal charges, including armed robbery. A judge told him to choose between the military or jail.

Around that time, he met William Brink, a preacher who had an Ohio group home and ministered to delinquent youths. Brink invited Weier-

man to live at the religious home.

He showed up with long hair and a leather vest. “I was just 12 ways of bad.”

But Weierman quickly gained Brink’s trust and at 19, he married the preacher’s daughter. They worked together at the children’s home in the early 1980s, when Ohio regulators required the home to stop using corporal punishment.

In 1984, Florida legislators passed a law that would allow religious homes to use corporal punishment if they could justify it with Scripture.

Weierman’s father-in-law was among the first to apply. In 1985, he opened Victory Children’s Home, a home for abused and abandoned children in Fort Pierce.

His son-in-law would soon work there.

But not before leaving behind an allegation in Ohio.

In 1986, a 16-year-old girl told police she had had sex with Weierman more than 30 times. The girl passed a lie-detector test and had kept a calendar of the sexual encounters, the local police chief told the Akron Beacon Journal at the time.

Weierman denied the allegations. And prosecutors declined to press charges, saying there wasn’t enough evidence.

Still, Brink and his home took criticism. After learning of the girl’s allegations months before the police, group home officials conducted their own investigation. They deemed the allegations false and never reported them to police.

Three years later, Weierman would find himself in a similar position. He investigated sex abuse claims against his new home’s director without informing police.

Police later arrested Weierman and accused him of tampering with a witness and failure to report child abuse. Although the charges were dropped, Weierman now says he should have called police as soon as he heard the girl’s allegation.

A few years later, his father-in-law was convicted in Ohio of sexual abuse involving a 14-year-old resident he took in as his daughter and a 16-year-old he made his wife.

Brink went to prison.

Weierman remained in charge of the Florida home, now split from the Ohio pastor.

A state license

Through the 1990s, Weierman would continue to have problems. State abuse investigators were called to his campus at least four times, finding evidence once that Victory Children’s Home was using excessive corporal punishment.

At the end of the decade, despite years of complaints, DCF granted Weierman a state license to run a foster home in Florida. The license meant more stringent rules and more state inspections, but it allowed Weierman’s home to accept children seized from parents by child protection workers.

Both sides soon had regrets.

In 2000 alone, DCF records show six child abuse allegations: a boy thrown by a staff member, one dragged and beaten by a peer then refused medical treatment, a boy abandoned in the parking lot of another youth shelter, and kids being hit with a belt and slammed against walls and the ground.

Reports show DCF investigators found cred-



CHOKING IT DOWN: A 14-year-old eats a bowl of “stuff” during lunch at Southeastern Military Academy. Eating “stuff” is a form of punishment. On this day it was a bowl of soggy vegetables swimming in vinegar and spices. Boys must eat every bite and they must be quick about it.

ible evidence in four of the cases, including those involving asphyxiation and beatings.

Weierman denies all abuse allegations.

“If I said to you, ‘If you don’t straighten up, I’m going to kick the snot out of you,’ is that threatened harm? I don’t know,” he said. “Child abuse requires intent to commit harm. You have to intend to commit the harm.”

Weierman said he regrets getting a state license, saying the state’s requirement that his children have access to an abuse hotline led to a spate of false reports.

“If you’re a licensed facility, you have to make a phone available to any child,” Weierman said. “At times, I had eight investigators here at a time...”

“Children can lie.”

By the end of 2000, DCF had had enough.

On the day the agency was scheduled to present evidence to a judge to revoke Weierman’s license, he surrendered it.

But that wasn’t the end.

A second chance

When a group home that calls itself Christian can’t or won’t get a license, when it is chased out of another state for refusing oversight, or, like Weierman’s, when it fails to meet government standards, Florida provides a fallback:

FACCCA accreditation.

Florida is among a handful of states that legally recognize a religious exemption when it comes to licensing children’s homes.

By law, exempted facilities must register with the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a nonprofit group that accredits homes. The association has long allowed homes to strike children with paddles, so long as they justify it with the Bible and pray with the child afterward.

Weierman surrendered his home’s state license on Feb. 12, 2001. The following month, DCF got a letter saying FACCCA had accredited his home.

Under FACCCA, Weierman was able to shut down direct access to the state’s child abuse hotline, which was created to dispatch authorities

any time allegations are reported.

Longtime child advocate Jack Levine, who opposed the religious exemption when it was voted into law in 1984, says such safeguards exist for a reason. To complain that kids lie is just a way of avoiding scrutiny, he said.

“It’s so easy to find an excuse for doing the wrong thing,” he said. “You can blame the child. You can blame the system. You can sit around and make excuses for any kind of malfeasance, but that doesn’t make it right.”

Weierman’s home was accredited by FACCCA for three years. The complaints kept coming.

2002: The facility has been locking kids up in chains to keep them from running.

2002: Many of the children have current bruises or have had bruises in the past.

2003: Alan Weierman grabbed a child by the neck and slammed him against the wall with force.

2004: A staff member punched (a child) in the mouth and kned him in the chest... As a result, his mouth was bleeding.

Investigating these cases, DCF found credible evidence of beatings, inappropriate or excessive restraints, bruises or welts and physical injury.

Michele Muccigrosso sued Weierman’s corporation, saying her 12-year-old son, Dillon, was made to hike on broken feet.

“Our insurance company settled,” Weierman said. “That’s the learning curve. ... We marched them a lot, younger guys, 10, 11, 12 years old. Plates are still growing in their feet. We cut back the marching.”

Muccigrosso said the home disregarded a doctor’s order that her son not hike.

“He was in a wheelchair for five months.”

FACCCA cut ties with Weierman in June 2004. Its executive director later told police it was because the religious home had become a boot camp.

FACCCA officials have declined to provide the Times records of inspections, complaints or investigations at any of the homes it has accredited. They said they do not accredit boot camps because they are “not appropriate.”

The last rung

After failing under two separate forms of oversight in less than four years, Weierman was not shut down.



FOLLOWING ORDERS: A “recruit” rushes to line up before the boys head outside to exercise. Push-ups can be used as punishment here.



STRUCTURED LIVING: Boys march to their seats for lunch at Southeastern Military Academy. Throughout the day, recruits get lists of orders they must follow or face punishment.

Instead, he took advantage of a loophole in state law that allows children’s homes to skirt oversight by calling themselves “boarding schools.”

Department of Education officials keep a list of boarding schools, but do not police them. They do not inspect the campuses or establish discipline standards for the schools.

A state law passed in 2006 says boarding schools must be accredited by one of five scholastic organizations.

But those groups focus on academics. And no one has been checking to make sure the schools meet the requirement.

Weierman’s program has not been accredited under the boarding school rules since it registered as one, under the name Victory Forge, in 2004.

With the new name, came new complaints.

In July 2004, Weierman says, a boy left on the verge of kidney failure after being forced to endure what the colonel called an “extreme” amount of exercise.

Weierman said the boy’s kidneys were not functioning correctly and staff at the home made it worse by forcing him to drink a quart of water an hour.

“The more we did that, the more damage was caused by doing that,” Weierman said. “There was no way we could know.”

Weierman said a detective gave him “accolades” for catching the damage on time.

DCF made a “verified” finding of medical neglect.

Then, on April 6, 2008, Port St. Lucie police officers came upon the aftermath of a capture.

A runaway sat shirtless on a bench outside a middle school, cuffed at the hands, shackled at the ankles, surrounded by Weierman’s staff and the boys who had taken him down. He bore a 5-inch red mark on his neck.

“Please take me to jail,” 16-year-old Lochane Smith told the officers. “I don’t want to go back.”

When an officer questioned the home’s authority to shackle the student, Weierman cursed and yelled, police reports show. “If you had a black kid like that,” he told police, “you would put him in handcuffs also.”

The police took Smith to the station, where they got his story.

He said he had been shackled for 12 days, chained at the wrists even as he slept on his top bunk and released only to shower.

Employees had punched him, choked him,

thrown him against the walls.

He ran when he got a chance, vaulting over the fence, darting across the highway.

The home sent a search party, including boys.

He told police a recruit named Tango ran toward him yelling “I’m going to get you, black boy,” then tackling him and choking him, until an employee told Tango, “You better stop, the police are coming.”

DCF interviewed the 15 other boys at the facility and determined all had been in some way mistreated - bruised, bloodied, choked, shackled, subjected to “cruel and unusual punishment.”

One had been called an “Iraqi” and a “rag head.” Smith had been called a “black monkey.”

Soon after the incident, DCF called parents to take their boys home.

Police spoke to those same boys, who reported they saw Smith being pushed, dragged and “tossed around.” But the police determined none of his injuries rose to child abuse.

St. Lucie County Assistant State Attorney Jeff Hendriks wrote a letter saying no charges would be filed, in part, because parents had consented to corporal punishment.

In an interview from the jail where he landed years later on robbery charges, Smith, now 21, said the abuse was worse than that police report suggests.

He said staff slammed his head into the walls on the first day because he cried and pushed his face in the sand.

Smith said he was made to stand all day and allowed to urinate on himself.

“Some boot camps help people,” he said, “but Victory Forge made me worse.

“Look how I ended up.

“I pray nothing like what happened to me happens to someone else.”

‘Good faith effort’

In 2009, DCF tried to force Weierman to submit to oversight or shut down for good.

By then, he was calling his home Southeastern Military Academy and had registered it as a boarding school.

DCF sued, saying the registration and name changes were “evidence of his intent to circumvent and subvert” statute. The lawsuit summarized a history that included 35 prior child abuse allegations.

The staff at this facility, DCF wrote, continues to cross the line between acceptable discipline and



RUNAWAY SHACKLED: In 2008, when the home was called Victory Forge, Lochane Smith escaped. He told police he’d been shackled for 12 days. He recently gave an interview from jail: “Look how I ended up.”

abuse.

DCF attorneys argued that Weierman had no license or accreditation. Under state law, he should be considered a rogue foster home and be barred from accepting children.

But in a March 2011 order, St. Lucie Circuit Judge Dan L. Vaughn found that Weierman was making a “good faith effort” to get accredited and denied DCF’s request for an injunction.

A year later, Weierman is still trying to get accredited. He has applied with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which accredits public and private schools. The process takes a couple of years. Weierman says his home is up for review in March.

“I’m hoping and I’m praying they don’t look at the politics of it,” he said.

Still in business

For now, Southeastern Military Academy continues its daily routine.

Weierman still doesn’t have a problem threatening to beat a kid into a “bloody mud puddle.”

He needs to let them know he’s in charge.

When they threaten to fight him, he threatens them back - “I’m going to hurt you,” “I’m going to send you to the hospital,” “With my dying breath, I’m going to take you with me.”

“It’s all bull,” he said. “It’s all just a facade.”

But that facade is how Weierman molds his rebellious young boys.

At the academy, every action is scrutinized. A wrinkle in a bedsheet, a boot misplaced by 2 inches - all are worthy of punishment, because, to Weierman, all indicate something inside the boy

is still defiant. Throughout the day, recruits get lists of orders they must follow. But instructors switch up orders to cause confusion and create a reason to dole out punishment.

Any excuse is good enough. If a student asks permission to do something that’s already on his to-do list, he is punished.

Twenty-five push-ups here, 150 side-straddle hops there. Boys spend many hours in the “pit.”

Critical moments in Alan Weierman’s career

1984 Florida creates religious exemption for group homes.

1985 “Colonel” Alan Weierman’s father-in-law opens Victory Children’s Home, a religious children’s home in Florida.

1986 A 16-year-old girl says she had a sexual relationship with Weierman when he was working at a children’s home in Ohio. No charges filed.

1989 Weierman is aware but does not report a girl’s sex abuse allegations against another staff member at his Florida group home. Charges of tampering with a witness and failure to report abuse are later dropped.

1992 Weierman and his wife change the name of the home to Treasure Coast Victory Children’s Home when his father-in-law is accused of sexual abuse. They incorporate the home in Florida.

FEB. 2001 After operating under DCF oversight for about two years, and dealing with an increase in abuse allegations and findings, the home surrenders its state license. A month later, it is operating with religious accreditation under FACCCA.

JUNE 2004 The home loses its religious accreditation. Weierman changes the name of the home and registers as a “boarding school.”

APRIL 8, 2008 A boy claims he was shackled at the home for 12 days straight and berated with racial slurs.

2009 State officials seek a judge’s order to shut down the home, arguing it is not legally accredited. A judge later refuses.

They can also can get swats and lose family visits.

Michaela Mattox turned to Weierman to deal with the 14-year-old son she couldn't control. He was defiant, running away, smoking marijuana.

She left him at the academy five months ago without touring the home and now has regrets. She doesn't even know the names of the "captains" on the phone.

She has read about other boys' allegations online.

And when she speaks to her son on the phone, with staff listening, he cries so hard, she can barely understand what he says.

Your son may complain to you about unbearable pain, crying that it's too hard, says parent literature. DON'T BE FOOLED!

Among the most feared punishments is being sentenced to bowls of "stuff."

Boys on "stuff" must down soggy bowls of vegetables, swimming in vinegar and designed not to go down easy.

They get "stuff" every meal, every day until they complete their sentence. Some go more than a week with nothing else to eat. If they don't finish a bowl, it gets served up at the next meal.

Forcing kids to eat "stuff" may sound like juvenile hazing, but state child safety regulators have labeled it "bizarre punishment."

Weierman doesn't buy it.

"It's mind over matter," Weierman recently told a few boys, who had 15 minutes to shovel the peas and corn into their mouths.

"It's just vegetables."

They lifted their bowls to drink the acidic dregs.

One gagged.

Another vomited.

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report.

ONLINE Stories from survivors, details about unlicensed religious homes investigated for alleged abuse. Go to tampabay.com/faccca

Tampa Bay Times

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In God's name | Last of three parts.

SIN WON'T BE TOLERATED at a home to reform troubled girls where faith and punishment intermingle. Parents are promised an oasis. Young women who lived there tell a differ-

Locked away from sin

STORIES BY ALEXANDRA ZAYAS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHLEEN FLYNN • TIMES

Lighthouse of Northwest Florida offers refuge to parents terrified of losing their daughters to the tempest of a sinful world.

It promises an oasis where teenagers wear nylons and say "yes, ma'am," where Scripture is sung and words are spoken only in turn.

Alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, self-mutilation, eating disorders - the reform home approaches all ills with heavy doses of punishment and God.

The home's doors lock shut, to keep the girls in, and the sin out.

But within that isolation, strange things happen.

Girls say they have been ordered to tackle, pin down and sit on their out-of-control peers. They describe being confined to a time-out room the size of a walk-in closet, almost every waking hour, for days at a time.

Police reports filed over the years give glimpses of desperation. A girl slits her wrists with a razor blade. One grabs a butter knife. One tries to make a noose with her tights.

A girl bangs her head on the floor, screaming of murder and suicide, telling a police officer, "I will find a way to kill myself if you don't get me out of here."

Much of what goes on inside remains secret.

Lighthouse is one of about two dozen children's homes shielded from state oversight under a religious exemption created by Florida lawmakers in 1984. The homes are closed to state licensing officials and monitored instead by the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a private nonprofit organization whose inspection records are not made public.

Russell Cookston, head pastor at Lighthouse, offered no religious justification for restraining girls or putting them in isolation. He first said those measures were rare and used only to calm girls who were endangering others.

However, he went on to describe how multiple-day sentences in the Room of Grace are handed out on a sliding scale depending on the "offense" a girl committed.

Restraint and isolation, he said, are the last



BIBLICAL FOUNDATION: Girls listen to a sermon during a service at Lighthouse of Northwest Florida on Aug. 9. Girls pledge allegiance to the American flag, the Bible and the Christian flag.

resort. They are followed by counseling sessions. The goal, he said, is to have a "therapeutic rapport."

"When a child goes ballistic they can do a lot of damage," Cookston said. "That's the last thing that we want."

What he wants, Cookston said, is for girls to learn how to be polite and do what they're told.

"We want them to get to the point that parents can work with them again. ...

"God actually put the program together," he said. "We're teaching his word and that never changes. ...

"It's a liberal world. And we show them how they can live conservatively."

God's program

A two-lane road slices through the cotton and peanut fields of Jay, a one-stoplight farm town in the western end of the Panhandle, just south of Alabama.

For two decades, girls from as far as California have found themselves here, following a long driveway toward a manicured compound, unaware of what awaits them in their minimum 12-month stay.

The home had fewer than 20 girls when the Times visited in August. Monthly tuition is \$1,500 paid for privately by parents and donations. The home advertises for girls as young as 10.

Most days at Lighthouse start before sunrise and are filled with self-directed study and ser-

mons. Girls pledge allegiance to the American flag, the Bible and the Christian flag.

The home is clean, the pantry well-stocked. On Friday nights, girls play games like balloon volleyball. “We bring students in here that are trying to be older than they really are, trying to have their body cash checks that they can’t right now,” Cookston said. “To be a kid again is refreshing.”

Little filters in. No radio, no TV, no Internet.

Girls who behave get their first phone conversation with parents 90 days in; calls are monitored, letters reviewed. Girls who break the rules - which include uttering the words “yeah” or “cool” - must copy hundreds of lines from the Bible.

Reach 5,000 lines and you’re on detention, stripped of privileges like shaving, speaking and making eye contact, former residents say.

It is not uncommon for girls to have to work off tens of thousands of lines before they can get off restriction, though Cookston says in the past three years, he has sometimes granted “grace,” resetting punishment to a goal with a realistic end.

Good girls rise in the ranks to become “helpers.” Troublemakers are isolated, or worse.

Tackled and floored

In 2007, Lindsay Brooks was a 15-year-old with a neurological condition she could not control. She was prone to violent outbursts and her mother had run out of options.

Brooks, of St. Petersburg, had been in and out of treatment in four different counties. None was like Lighthouse, where Brooks said she was gang-tackled and sat on by as many as six girls at a time.

The Times interviewed a dozen residents who spent time at Lighthouse in the past five years, 10 of them in the past two. Those who went on the record: Ali Reichle, Allie Crawford, Brittani Stofregen, Cheyenne Homminga, Hannah Kilfoyle, Felisha Ibanez, Jennifer McKee, Jessica Albanes, Lindsay Brooks and Rachel Beaton.

Some said they benefited from the program.

All described a practice in which the same troubled girls the program sets out to help are used to restrain others.

Some recall “flooring” sessions that lasted an hour or longer, with helpers having to switch out in shifts, even after the legs of the girl beneath them had begun to numb and purple.

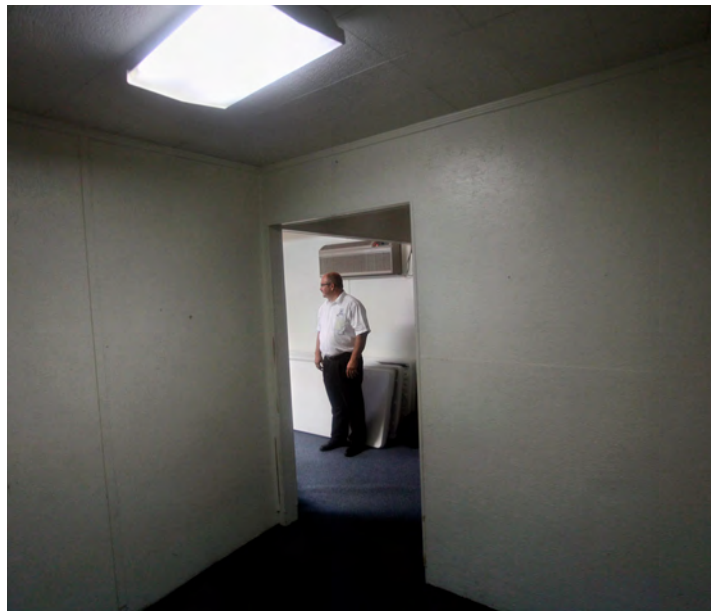
Residents at Lighthouse when Brooks was there in 2007 and 2008 recall her being floored frequently, by six to seven other girls, sometimes for hours.

“Six girls sitting on top of you is like those silent movies where they’re running through the park and they stop under a window and a piano is dropped on top of them,” said Brooks, now 20. “Your body is functioning the way it should be, then bam, you’ve got, like, 3,000 pounds on you....

“You could take little tiny breaths, because there was so much weight on you.”

Girls recall others being floored not only for violence, but for walking away or giving attitude.

Rachel Beaton, now 20, said she was once floored for crying too loud. “When they get off of



LIGHTHOUSE OF NORTHWEST FLORIDA: Pastor Russell Cookston stands outside the “Room of Grace,” where girls are isolated as punishment. The home is in a one-stoplight town south of Alabama.

you, your body is so numb. I used to have bruises on my ribs, my hip bones.”

One allegation about flooring is documented in a 2008 Santa Rosa County Sheriff’s Office report. Parents showed up at the station with a daughter who had a human bite mark on her leg, an injury she said she sustained while restraining a disobedient girl.

When DCF investigated, Cookston said the girls restrained each other on their own, not at the direction of the home.

Cookston repeated that explanation even after the Times told him former residents said they had been ordered by adults to tackle or sit on other girls.

Cheyenne Homminga said she was made to physically “put down” other girls when she was at Lighthouse from January 2011 to January 2012. The 15-year-old said she was given the task because she was bigger than the others.

“They wanted you to sit on their thighs and then to hold with your hands their hands on their back,” she said. “It’s never like you lightly hold their hands together. You’re really violent and you’re forcing

them. ... I hated putting girls down. A bunch of the girls didn’t like me anymore.

“I never wanted to hurt them.

“But it was like I had to, I was commanded to.”

Robert Friedman, a psychologist and professor emeritus at the University of South Florida Department of Child and Family Studies, said the practice described by former residents is harmful to everyone involved. It makes the girl on the floor angrier and adds to the sense that she’s worthless, he said.

“The act of holding down a friend, a bunk mate, a roommate, it leaves the youngsters feeling bad about themselves,” he said. “It turns them against each other instead of creating a supportive peer environment where they help each other and they listen to each other.”

‘A disgusting little box.’

After a girl is floored, her likely destination is a white, windowless cell called the “Room of Grace.”

The room, the size of a small bathroom or walk-

in closet, has no bed, no chairs, just a thin carpet for girls confined all day, from the time they wake until bed.

Former residents complain they would be held there for days, with limited bathroom breaks, nothing to do and no one to talk to.

Other girls, they said, had soiled the carpet, out of necessity or spite.

“It was a disgusting little box,” 18-year-old Ali Reichle said. “Whenever you walked in that room, you could smell just the puke and the urine.”

The makeshift cell has an opening where a door would have hung. When a girl is banished, the opening is blocked with a table and manned by someone who makes sure the troublemaker stays put. Cookston said an adult is always present; residents said girls were often watched over by other children.

When the Times visited in August, the room was barren, the only sign of its purpose walls scarred by years of punches. There was no smell.

On the wall just outside the empty doorjamb, officials have hung an inspirational poster - Oh, cheer up!

The irony is not lost on girls who passed through Lighthouse. Many say they spent hours stuck in the room, seething and being forced to listen to taped evangelical sermons:

“There was yelling in them,” recalled 16-year-old Allie Crawford. “Some girls would plug their ears. Some girls would kick walls. I was definitely sick of it.”

Even a few days in isolation is unacceptable, experts say.

“Incredibly abusive,” Friedman said. “Absolutely, totally inappropriate.”

Five former residents recall girls being confined for more than a week at a time. Four said they remember girls who were kept away for more than a month.

Cookston denied such lengthy stays. He said the worst offenses net a girl three days in the room, and if she misbehaves inside, she can get another three days. Girls are given adequate bathroom breaks, he said, and taken to chapel. Although he remembers one girl being kept in the room overnight, he said “no one’s been in there a month or weeks.”

But if Cookston wanted to hold girls that long in isolation, there was little to stop him.



NO RADIO, NO TV, NO INTERNET: These decorations in the cafeteria have a religious and patriotic theme. A proper response at Lighthouse is “yes, ma’am,” not “yeah.”

During its 28-year history, FACCCA, the private, nonprofit agency that oversees Lighthouse, has had no limit on how long its facilities could hold children in seclusion.

After the Times visited the home, FACCCA inspectors went to the campus and told Cookston he had to cap seclusion time to one day. The association plans to adjust its standards, executive director Buddy Morrow said.

FACCCA officials also told Lighthouse it could not use children to watch or restrain others.

“That was not acceptable,” Morrow said.

Stories from the past

Lighthouse’s story goes back long before Cookston and stretches far beyond Jay. It even meanders through Mexico. But it begins with the name on a Panhandle property deed: Pastor Michael Palmer.

In 1985, at a gated compound in Ramona, Calif., the Baptist preacher founded Victory Christian Academy, a home to reform troubled girls. It was never licensed.

In 1988, a student working on a campus construction project was killed by falling lumber. After that, California officials saw the “Get Right Room,” where girls told them they were confined for up to 12 days, made to listen to hours of taped sermons.

In 1992, a judge ordered that Palmer apply for a state license or shut down.

Instead, Palmer moved to Florida, where a religious exemption meant he could run Victory without government hassle.

That very year, Victory was up and running in Jay.

Although Florida child abuse investigators reviewed allegations several times, they never found evidence of abuse, and Palmer’s girls’ home operated without public incident for years.

Then in 2004, a former resident showed up outside the home and caused a stir in this sleepy town. She carried a sign calling Palmer a rapist.

In November of that year, Rebecca Ramirez, 36, told Santa Rosa sheriff’s deputies the pastor raped her in 1992 while she was 16 at the home in Florida. The Times does not typically name alleged victims of sexual abuse, but Ramirez gave permission to identify her, believing it will give validity to her story.

She told the Times the abuse began with private, lights-off sermons in his office. She said he told her God wanted him to make her his wife, and when she reminded him he already had a wife, he said that marriage didn’t count because it happened before he was a Christian.

“He was kissing on me,” she said. “And then he told me to lay down on the floor.

“And so I did....

“I didn’t make a noise. I didn’t say anything....

“You don’t talk back to him.”

Palmer has denied it all. A statute of limitations prevented the case from moving forward.

Palmer left Lighthouse not long after Ramirez’s report. He did not respond to a letter the Times mailed to a home he owns in Fort Dodge, Iowa.



STUDY AND SERMONS: Girls do their schoolwork at Lighthouse of Northwest Florida, where most days start before sunrise. They'll spend at least a year at Lighthouse. Tuition at the boarding home for troubled girls costs \$1,500 a month, paid for privately by parents and donations.

He no longer appears to be running the girl's home in Florida.

He left that to Pastor Cookston, whose daughter had lived at Palmer's home.

Cookston said he started working at the home in 1996 and soon after moved to Mexico, where Palmer had started Genesis by the Sea, a girls' home near Rosarito Beach.

Cookston was head pastor when the home was shut down by Mexican authorities in 2004.

At the time, officials said the home was not properly licensed. They were concerned by the electric fence surrounding Genesis and told the Copley News Service that neighbors had reported hearing "cries in the night."

The Times spoke with three former Genesis residents who said "flooring" was common under Cookston's leadership and recalled a girl who slept bound to her bed.

That former resident, Melanie Villaruel, 26, told the Times that when she was caught after running away, she was made to walk barefoot for weeks, bound in plastic zip-ties.

Cookston denies any abuse occurred in Mexico and said authorities there shut him down for technical infractions, including not having a permit for a sign on a wall and not having business hours posted.

And Palmer?

"The only reason he holds onto a house here is so he feels he still has it or has claim to it," Cookston said. "I let the parents know that he's not here. He's not a part of this ministry. He's gone.

"But what do you do about stories from the past?"

'I'm so sorry'

In 2007, St. Petersburg mother Michelle Brooks needed help with her daughter's uncontrollable violence. She was disillusioned by state-licensed group homes, where she felt Lindsay didn't get adequate supervision and staff was just there for a paycheck.

She was drawn to Lighthouse because it shared her Christian ideals. She spoke to Cookston and

his wife and she saw misty eyes and heard trembling voices when they spoke of changing girls' lives.

She still feels they care.

But had she known what would happen to her daughter, she said she would never have agreed to send Lindsay to Lighthouse.

Lindsay had been there for almost two years when Brooks called the pastor from the hospital the second time her daughter was taken in under the Baker Act, a Florida law that allows for the temporary detention of a person having a mental health emergency.

She had some serious questions.

Lindsay had told hospital workers she had been hog-tied.

Brooks knew Lindsay might be restrained.

But she didn't expect this.

Lindsay had been kicking people, she remembers the pastor told her. "Well, I know she can do that," Brooks said.

"But then he's telling me that she wouldn't stop screaming for eight to 10 hours solid. Solid.

"How they weren't feeding her because she would throw the plate, so they stopped bringing her food.

"Her feet and her hands were bound because she was trying to hurt other people.

"And I said, why didn't you have her Baker Acted before you bound her hands and her feet?"

"He says, 'Because we're trying to handle her.'"

She remembers he acknowledged, in that conversation, that his group home was not equipped to deal with Lindsay.

"I was done," the mother said. "I didn't know where we were going from here. I didn't know what all of this meant. But all I knew was that wasn't okay."

Lindsay is doing better now, in her social abilities and behavior.

Her mother says she connected with some good staff members at Lighthouse and, like some others who spoke with the Times, left with a deeper sense of faith. She was also weaned off of medications that did her more harm than good.

But something needs to change, Michelle Brooks said.

“There absolutely needs to be regulation somewhere,” she said. “There needs to be outside eyes. These children have emotional difficulties. So there should absolutely be someone there, in the mental health field that’s licensed by the state, monitored by the state and who is also reporting back to state agencies what’s taking place.”

Michelle Brooks listened to Lindsay describe it all to a reporter this past summer, and the mother had to pause at one point, saying she couldn’t breathe.

At the end of the interview, she hugged her daughter and whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report.

About the reporting for this series

The Tampa Bay Times spent a year gathering thousands of pages of public records and interviewing dozens of young adults who passed through the unlicensed group homes that operate in Florida.

The newspaper focused its investigation primarily on homes and reform programs for teens that are exempt from state oversight for religious reasons. Under state law, the authority over those facilities is the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a private, non-profit group.

During its reporting, the newspaper also uncovered and included in its analysis several reform homes that had no state license or FACCCA accreditation. Some of those homes had previously been accredited by FACCCA. Others never had credentials.

For all the homes, the Times requested information on every abuse investigation prompted by calls to the Department of Children and Families' abuse hotline. The newspaper also talked to dozens of former residents and gathered health inspection reports, 911 dispatch records, police reports and lawsuits related to the homes.

Rules vary

In Florida, the oversight of children's homes can vary greatly depending on how the facility classifies itself.

OVERSIGHT AND INSPECTION

DCF licensed facilities: The Department of Children and Families runs background checks on employees, inspects annually and can order changes in a home's practices.

FACCCA oversight: Homes with religious exemptions answer to this nonprofit group, which conducts its own inspections. They provide names of children's home employees to the state, which runs background checks.

Unaccredited boarding schools: The state Department of Education registers these schools but does not inspect them or review their operations. Boarding schools must seek accreditation, but they have three years.

ABILITY TO REPORT ABUSE

DCF: All children must have access to a phone to call Florida's child abuse hotline.

FACCCA: Officials say kids have a right to report abuse, but former residents said they had no way. Children can be denied access to phones for months at a time. Unaccredited boarding schools: No guaranteed access or training.

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

DCF: Banned.

FACCCA: Allowed, with guidelines. Unaccredited boarding schools: No limits on corporal punishment.

SHACKLING AND CONFINEMENT

DCF: Rules vary from one type of facility to another, but mechanical restraints typically require permission from a doctor. Even confining a child to a room generally has a one hour limit.

FACCCA: Does not endorse mechanical restraints but allows it. No restriction on how long a child can be secluded. FACCCA director expects board to toughen restrictions next month. Unaccredited boarding schools: No limits

RELIGIOUS SERVICES

DCF: Many programs offer prayer and church services, but children cannot be forced to attend.

FACCCA: Mandatory prayer and services are allowed. Children must be prayed with after corporal punishment. Unaccredited boarding schools: No restrictions

LEADER CREDENTIALS

DCF: Director must have a bachelor's degree and at least three years' experience in management.

FACCCA: Director must have at least a high school diploma or equivalent and four years with executive experience in child care and development.

Unaccredited boarding schools: No requirements.