

State revokes therapist's license

By CHRIS COLLINS

Of the Baker City Herald

Oregon has revoked the license of a marriage and family therapist who treated clients in Baker County, calling techniques he used to treat children "a danger to the public."

Keith A. Reber was found to have used an unapproved style of "holding therapy" that included "poking clients, pushing hard enough to cause vomiting and screaming in their faces," according to the Oregon Board of Licensed Professional Counselors and Therapists.

In one example included in the licensing board's order, Reber was said to have wrapped a boy in a sheet, laid on top of him and pushed his fingers into the boy's chest. At the end of the session, Reber made a fist and pushed it hard into the boy's rib cage, the report stated.

Three of the child clients the board said were mistreated by Reber were in foster care with the Oregon department of Human Resources. Reber was found to have used the "holding therapy" on them after agreeing with DHS officials not to use the technique, according to the board's order.

Investigators from the state Department of Justice interviewed five victims, four of whom were children, said Kevin Neely, Department of Justice spokesman.

The licensing board concluded that Reber's violations were "so egregious and reprehensible" that to allow him to continue practicing in Oregon "would be an abrogation of the board's responsibility to regulate the practice of counseling therapy and would not protect the public."

Betty Huntsman of Baker City, who has provided long-term foster care to nine children over the past 15 years, said she was glad Reber would no longer be allowed to work in Oregon.

"I'm just happy he doesn't have a chance to hurt any more of Oregon's children," said Huntsman, who is familiar with the cases. "They would come out of therapy with bruises-and that's not right."

Because of the abusive treatment, counseling is no longer an option for some of the children involved, Huntsman said.

"The children cannot have any counseling and trust the counselor. And these are children who can benefit from counseling," she said. "The kids have to get out of their mires themselves because they cannot go to counseling."

Reber had practiced full time at Mountain Valley Mental Health Clinic in Baker City from Sept. 23, 1996, to July 2001 when he began working for Mountain Valley under contract for 12 hours a week, said Tim Mahoney, Mountain Valley director. Reber also had a private practice in La Grande. He provided therapy for adults and children.

"To my knowledge there were never any allegations stemming from his contact with Mountain Valley Mental Health that related to the loss of his license," Mahoney said.

Reber provided training for the DHS foster parent certification program in Baker County from the fall of 2000 until June 30, 2001, said Todd Siex, DHS Service Delivery area manager for Baker, Union and Wallowa counties.

Reber left the area in November 2001 to work for the Cascade Center for Family Growth in the Salt Lake City area, Mahoney said. He is no longer employed there, a spokeswoman at the center said. Efforts to contact him for this story were unsuccessful.

Holding therapy when used appropriately, is a recognized form of practice, the licensing board

stated. It is used with children diagnosed as having attachment disorder, which was Reber's area of expertise, Siex said.

Children with attachment disorder have no developed adequate bonding relationships with caregivers during their first years of life and later have trouble forming and maintaining relationships with others throughout life.

The Cascade Center for Family Growth at Orem, Utah, advocates holding therapy in combination with other treatment for children with attachment disorder. Holding therapy is described this way on the center's Web site:

The therapy allows "a child who has been severely abused and neglected to verbally express extreme fear, anger and sadness in an environment that is safe and nurturing. These children do not believe that an adult can hear the pain they feel inside and still choose to love them and care for them. Holding therapy allows the expression in a safe environment, of the extreme trauma they experienced in their birth home. Holding therapy should only be practiced by trained therapists."

The center was initially implicated in the deaths of two children whose parents were charged with criminal child abuse homicide. The most recent case was the death of Cassandra Killpack, a 4-year-old whose parents allegedly forced her to drink large amounts of water over a short period of time.

The center denies recommending such treatment; no charges were ever filed against the center.

In another example of Reber's therapy, the licensing board said that in treating a girl for anxiety, stress management, sexual abuse, mental anguish and panic attacks, Reber wrapped the child in a blanket, touched her and laid across her. He refused to stop when the client asked him to, according to the report.

In treating two other children, from about 1999 through 2000, Reber wrapped them in a sheet and blanket and laid on top of them, pushing his elbow into their abdomens or stomach areas so hard that at times the children vomited, the report stated. As part of the treatment, he also occasionally required the children to try to free themselves from the tightly wrapped blankets, the report said.

The board also found that Reber would confront his patients by berating them and raising his voice near their heads.

In treating another boy for fire-starting behavior, the report said Reber again used holding therapy. The child's parent was instructed to use a treatment protocol that included allowing the boy to repeatedly light matches.

"The use of holding therapy for the specific fire-starting behavior was not done with a thorough assessment, treatment plan or informed consent," the board said.

Reber also was found to have misrepresented facts about his Oregon license while applying for licensure before the Utah Board of Marriage and Family Therapists, the report said. He told the Utah board that his discipline matter in Oregon was resolved when it wasn't, and he said he had not sent a letter to the Oregon board, when he had, the report said. Those acts violated the "highest standards of the professional integrity and competence required of a therapist," the board said.

Reber held a temporary license as a marriage and family therapist in Utah, from Sept. 15, 1995, until May 5, 2001, when his license expired, and he failed to file a renewal, according to the Utah Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing.

The Oregon licensing board's report stated that in a review of the agency's file on Reber, Dr. Dave Ziegler, a licensed psychologist, said Reber used techniques as described by the child client that "were physically intrusive, controversial and not recognized in the professional community and that there was a complete absence in (Reber's) file of any documentation on the use of such techniques."

The board found that his techniques “were intended to cause psychological and physical pain, did not advance the welfare and best interests of the client, and do not respect the rights of the client.”

Reber first was served with a notice of the proposed license revocation on July 12, 2001, according to the order. A first amended notice of revocation was served on Oct. 1, 2002, and a second notice was served on Dec. 30, 2002. On Feb. 13, 2003, the third amended notice of proposed license revocation was served.

Reber then requested a hearing on the matter and was referred to the hearing panel. the case was set to go before the panel on July 14-15, but instead, Reber withdrew his request for a hearing and the default order was issued on July 22.

‘Holding Therapy’ controversial

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“Holding Therapy” is designed to help the most difficult children and has its advocated among people who’ve seen it used appropriately and successfully, according to Julie Garchar, Baker High School guidance counselor.

It was difficult to find mental health professionals willing to talk about “holding therapy” on the record.

Garchar, who says she has limited knowledge of holding therapy, learned of the technique while studying under Foster Cline at Evergreen Consultants in Human Behavior in Evergreen, Colo., where she was trained to teach Love and Logic parenting classes.

“The first year is very important as far as children getting their needs met,” Garchar said. “At that stage of life is when you develop trust.”

That’s when children bond with their caregivers and develop attachment relationships. But when that bonding is disrupted, normal development also is hampered.

“Even children with illness and pain don’t build that trust,” she said.

Bonding is important in establishing a foundation to build the next stage of development, she said.

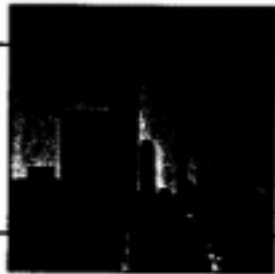
“If you don’t have that trust you can’t ever build a relationship with other people.”

Garchar said that in her understanding of holding therapy, it is designed to break the child’s strong will, which will then allow them to bond.

“With these kinds of kids you do need extreme measures,” she said.

Treatment for children with attachment disorder is limited, but vital to helping those affected develop into productive citizens, Garchar added.

“These are kids with no conscience,” she said. “These people are the toughest of the tough.”

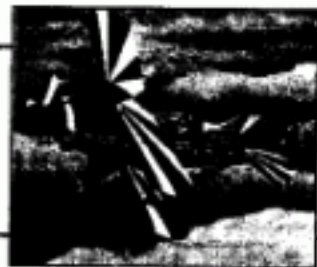


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Reber: State board calls violations 'egregious'

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WRAPPED CHILDREN, WHO SUFFERED

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