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Lack of funding, space hinders help for addicts

Under a Florida act, family and friends can petition for court-ordered aid for addicts, but a lack of funding, space at treatment centers means ...

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DELRAY BEACH

In a small, nondescript hearing room at the South County Courthouse, a skinny 13-year-old with a serious marijuana problem is getting an ultimatum: clean up his act or be involuntarily committed to a residential treatment center.

The boy's dad bluntly says he's not sure the teen can stay straight, and he fears burying his son.

Despite the father's concerns, he asks Magistrate Diane Kirigin to put off in-patient treatment for now and give the boy another shot at staying clean. She agrees, but warns the boy this is his last chance.

Next, she hears from a 25-year-old Greenacres woman addicted to alcohol and prescription drugs. Unlike many of the addicts that Kirigin meets, Jessica Lambert wants help. She's 11 weeks pregnant.

"I've been wanting treatment for a long time," Lambert tells Kirigin. "I'm really wanting to do this this time."

Under Florida's Marchman Act, family members or friends can petition the court to force a loved one into treatment for a substance abuse problem. If residential treatment is recommended after assessment, the person can be checked into a facility for 60 days or more with a petition to extend the time.

It was an unusually light docket on a recent Wednesday for Marchman Act assessment and treatment hearings, Kirigin said. She often spends all day listening to desperate parents and loved ones, looking into the often vacant eyes of addicts who don't want to be sitting in front of her.

The family members who want to force their relatives to receive help for a substance abuse problem aren't the only ones who are frustrated.

Kirigin, family law attorneys and addiction professionals say the Marchman Act system is great in theory, but has many imperfections.

An addict ordered into residential treatment after an assessment is unlikely to get that help right away, Kirigin said.

"That's sad when you have someone who wants to get better and you can't get them a bed," Kirigin said.

Palm Beach County has two publicly supported residential facilities licensed to accept adult involuntary commitments, the Drug Abuse Foundation in [Delray Beach](#) and CARP (Comprehensive Alcoholism Rehabilitation Programs) in West Palm Beach.

The court's frustration is valid, considering the lengths that family members have gone through to go before a magistrate who will order treatment, said Alton Taylor, executive director at DAF.

"To go through all of that and get a facility and be told to take a number — it creates a tremendous amount of frustration for loved ones," Taylor said.

At any given time, there is typically a two- to three- week wait for a residential bed at DAF and between 70 and 100 people on a waiting list, Taylor said. Fees are assessed on a sliding scale if the patient meets financial limits.

During those days and weeks, an addict's condition could worsen, Kirigin said. The addict could overdose, or get arrested.

"To get the person services before they commit a crime benefits a community as well," said Taylor. He said he has tried to get legislators to provide more funding for civil commitments.

There are more residential substance abuse beds allocated for those in the criminal system than for those who have never been in trouble with the law.

It's a statistic not lost on Lynne Hennessey, a family law attorney who has been representing Marchman clients for six years.

"The most certain and quickest way to get assistance for your family member is to get them in the criminal system," Hennessey said. "We should be helping them before they commit crimes."

Statewide, the Florida Department of Children & Families pays for 905 residential beds, which include civil commitments, while the Department of Corrections funds 1,567, according to those agencies. In total, there are 7,100 licensed residential beds in the state. There are even fewer publicly funded spots for children — just 335 residential beds.



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"It is a funding issue," said DCF spokeswoman Sarrah Troncoso. "We do work with Florida's most vulnerable population and there's a lot that we're faced with. We do the best we can with what we're given."

Troncoso said the agency recommends family members seeking help for addicts also look for other ways of getting them treatment through support groups and other facilities.

Jack Frydman, founder and chief executive officer of Alternatives in Treatment, a private 30-bed licensed residential treatment facility in [Boca Raton](#), said family members who are told they are on a waiting list at a publicly funded facility shouldn't be discouraged. Facilities such as Alternatives in Treatment will accept insurance, unlike some treatment centers, and will make arrangements to accept payment in installments if the person qualifies.

"For middle-class and working-class people, we are able to deliver a lot of services," Frydman said.

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