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THE ISLAND

Autism facility battling state's abuse charges

■ Eden II officials maintain a 1995 state document contains false accusations of mistreatment

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Eden II, a Staten Island facility for autistic people, has amassed numerous reports of mistreating clients over the years — including accounts of striking children in its school and abusing adults in its group home — despite efforts by the state at reform, the Advance has learned.

The most recent reports of abuse and mistreatment emerged in a November 1995 report by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), which was obtained by the Advance.

But Eden II officials maintain that the 1995 report is filled with false accusations manufactured by a small group of disgruntled employees and parents. Beyond that they maintain that investigators sensationalized many accounts to the point where benign treatment procedures came to re-

Eden II was formed in 1976 by parents of six children with autism. It is now a non-profit agency under state supervision. It has a preschool and school for autistic children at 150 Granite Ave. in Elm Park, and an adult program that includes a 10-bed group home in Arden Heights. It also has a small school in Plainview, L.I.

semble abuse.

Although state officials say the facility has improved in recent months, state documents obtained by the Advance show that the agency was first reprimanded in 1988 and was still being blasted as recently as late last year for using "abusive techniques."

The November OMRDD report, which followed an investigation of the facility, stated: "The inves-

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tigation shows that the agency has failed to protect consumers. Abusive techniques have been used by staff at the school [and the] preschool."

State officials declined to discuss the report in detail and stressed that the 1995 report is part of a larger ongoing investigation of the facility, expected to be completed in several weeks. But the report — which was followed by several demands by OMRDD, including that Eden II hire a new executive director and select a new board of directors — was obtained by the Advance.

State officials emphasized that Eden II has done much to clean up its act in the past year, including hiring a new director, instituting a new board of directors and adding new oversight measures and training.

Eden II has undertaken to challenge the report's findings before OMRDD, asserting that instances of mistreatment are few and swiftly addressed.

"I know this report looks terrible, but it is not a final report, and we plan on contesting it," said Dominic DiPrisco, a member of Eden II's newly formed executive board and a parent of a child in the school. "It is a slanted report."

He added, "The assertions made in this report would constitute child abuse, and we don't do that."

Eden II officials acknowledged that abuse and mistreatment existed at its 10-person adult group home in Arden Heights, where accounts of abuse prompted the initial state review in 1988. In fact, the adult home, which houses men age 16 and over, is undergoing an even more severe state review than the school. That review threatens to close the home, or place it under direct state control, unless conditions improve. Eden II officials maintain, however, a change in leadership has resolved problems at the adult home.

But the school for children, they maintain, has been unfairly criticized from the start.

The 1995 report was based on staff interviews, site visits and reviews of Eden II committee meeting minutes, incident reports, investigation reports and other correspondence.

The report emerged before a backdrop of a 1988 state order criticizing the facility's treatment and ordering change. That state order was updated in 1989 and in 1995.

The 1988 review of Eden II was performed at the state's request by Walter Christian, an adjunct clinical professor of psychiatry at the Boston University School of Medicine. He concluded at the time: "I find that Eden II is inadequately, cruelly or unsafely caring for developmentally disabled persons at both its school and its adult day program."

As a result, OMRDD placed Eden II under a "cease and desist order" in 1988 — which has yet to be lifted — that demanded safer treatment of its clients, staff retraining, better oversight of staffers and changes in some administration. That order was accompanied by the threat that if improvements did not occur the agency would be reported to the state Attorney General's Office for legal action.

Back in 1988, Eden II admitted using some physical punishment but denied that such actions con-

stituted cruel or unsafe care, according to state documents. To this day the use of sometimes forceful contact and even physical punishment — called aversives — remains a controversy in the treatment of autism, though New York State has spoken against such procedures.

Eden II officials, however, insist that such aversives have not been used at the school since the 1988 cease and desist order.

But the controversial 1995 report concluded that problems there have persisted.

The 20-page document details more than a dozen staff accounts of abuse and mistreatment between 1993 and 1995. They include accusations that a teacher slapped a preschool child, that a teacher forced a student to eat a piece of turkey that he had vomited, and that a teacher had applied hot mustard to the tongue of a child to punish the child for spitting.

Also, the report indicated that Eden II had "flagrantly violated" mandates that oversee the handling and review of incidents and allegations of abuse, glossing over many incidents.

The report starkly contrasted the positive image Eden II paints in its color brochure, which shows photos of staff and children working together in harmony. The brochure notes that Eden II was formed in 1976 by parents of children with autism. It has a school for autistic children at 150 Granite Ave. in Elm Park, and an adult program that includes a 10-bed group home in Arden Heights.

On Staten Island, Eden II employs about 11 teachers and 35 assistants for about 70 students. It has an annual budget of about \$3.5 million, most of it coming from the state.

Autism is a severe developmental disorder with symptoms that can include a sense of social detachment and unresponsiveness, self-injurious behaviors and other mental disabilities.

The 1995 OMRDD report concluded: "The staff reports of abuse appear to be credible: some reports are corroborated by another witness."

According to the report, several workers said they were afraid to report incidents for fear of being punished by agency administration, whom, the workers said, tacitly endorsed abusive techniques to handle behavior problems.

Management of the facility was also criticized.

"Allegations of abuse are routinely not reported, are not thoroughly investigated, and are not appropriately reviewed," said the report.

In addition, the report asserted that staff and management had not been properly trained in the reporting of incidents. One staff member told investigators that he started as an assistant teacher in 1992 with no training other than being handed the agency manual.

OMRDD officials keeping a close eye on Eden II said positive steps have been taken.

"There were problems," said Deborah Sturm Rausch, director of public affairs for OMRDD, "and there have been positive changes."

Eden II has appointed a new director, placed new people on its board of directors, initiated staff training and added a new level of staff oversight.

Ms. Rausch stressed, however,

that the full investigation into Eden II continues. "They are being evaluated regularly," she said, noting that if progress does not stay on course, the facility could be closed down.

Eden II Executive Director Joanne Gerenser vehemently argued against the report's assertions that children are being mistreated at the school.

"There are no practices in this program that place any of the kids

in inappropriate situations," said Ms. Gerenser, who has served as executive director for the past 10 months. She is part of the new regime at the facility.

Above all, she stressed that the school does not use physical punishment in handling problem youngsters. At one time such techniques were used widely in the treatment of autism, she said, but recent data reveals that positive enforcement is more effective.

During a tour of the facility given to the Advance, Ms. Gerenser spoke of a 5-year-old girl who came to the school with severe problems that led her to continually bang her head and bite her hands.

"In her case, music meant a lot to her. To reinforce her not banging her head, we turned on music every 30 seconds," she said. Showing the Advance the girl, Ms. Gerenser said, "Now we don't

have any head-banging or hand-biting."

She said the school had to dismiss only one teacher in the past year. And even though the 1995 report has been widely circulated among parents, no student has been pulled out of the school, she said.

Noting that there are always three to four staffers in each of the school's 10 classrooms, she said, "It would be difficult — unless the entire agency were practicing some God-awful treatment — for a person to do the stuff in the report."

Ms. Gerenser noted that just last month, Eden II's adult school program received a "very good" rating in an evaluation by the city's Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Alcoholism Services.

The state Attorney General's Office reports no complaints on file against Eden II.

The New York State Commission on the Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled said it has investigated 11 accusations of abuse and mistreatment against Eden II between 1991 and 1995. Four of the accusations were found to be without merit, four were substantiated, one was dropped and one case remains open. Records of a 1991 accusation of mistreatment could not be found by staff, officials said.

Ms. Gerenser insisted that the school staff is well-trained, and that any accusation of abuse is properly handled.

As for training, every staffer undergoes a three-day program at the beginning of every school year, she said, during which they are taught about autism and instructed in professional behavior. On-going training occurs throughout the year, she said.

Accusations of abuse, she said, are thoroughly checked out. "If there is an allegation of abuse, that person is suspended immediately. That's policy. We then conduct an investigation, and call anybody who needs to be notified — the child abuse hotline, the parents. If there is substantial evidence, the person is fired."

Several parents of children in the school blasted the damning 1995 state report as biased and untrue.

"This school is the best thing that ever happened to my daughter," said Paula Delfino of Prince's Bay. Two incidents of abuse listed in the report apply to her 7-year-old daughter, but she insisted they were twisted out of context.

The report, she said, alleged that a teacher had pushed her daughter's head back in order to force her to eat. But in actuality, her daughter has an eating problem and a teacher has to move the girl's jaw "to train her jaw to chew," and sometimes the girl resists, said her mother.

"They [the staff] were just doing their job," insisted Mrs. Delfino.

Several mothers of children at Eden II, upon learning that the Advance was preparing a story, called to support the school. They also asserted that the report was spurred by a small group of disgruntled parents and teachers, and that it did not reflect the true atmosphere at Eden II.

Tricia DiMaggio of New Dorp, who has two children at Eden II, said she trusted the school staff so much "that I would leave my children with them for the weekend."



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ CRAIG SCHNEIDER

The entrance to Eden II, a facility for autistic people in Elm Park.

Photo #12

Eden II executive director rebuts report accusations

The 1995 report on Eden II, performed by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), detailed more than a dozen accusations of mistreatment and abuse.

The following includes some of the accusations reported, along with rebuttal statements obtained by the Advance from Eden II Executive Director Joanne Gerenser. She has served as executive director of all programs for the past 10 months and as school director for four years prior to that.

■ A staff member alleged that another staff member had "struck, kicked and thrown" a client against the wall in order to deal with his aggressive outbursts. These allegations were made by at least five other staffers. The staffer allegedly abused the individual for a two- to three-month period before it was reported on Feb. 16, 1995. He was not suspended until March 2, 1995 when the state intervened. The allegations were eventually substantiated and the worker was terminated, the report said.

Ms. Gerenser said this report concerned the Eden II group home in Arden Heights. Because the report preceded her tenure as director, Ms. Gerenser said she could not comment on the specifics. But she acknowledged that the agency's adult home has experienced problems, including several allegations of abuse. She insisted that the new management had resolved the problems.

■ On March 21, 1995 a staffer was allegedly observed to have slapped a pre-school child across the face because he grabbed another student's juice. The in-house recommendations were limited to retraining all of the staff, the OMRDD report said.

Ms. Gerenser said the incident was investigated, including interviews with staffers. Several said the teacher did not slap the youngster but rather accidentally brushed the student's face while reaching for the juice, she said.

■ During a Thanksgiving lunch in 1993, an assistant teacher alleged that a teacher forced a student to eat a piece of turkey that he had vomited, the report said.

According to Ms. Gerenser, this allegation, made to investigators, was never made to Eden II and it was never substantiated.

■ On May 21, 1993, the elevator operator at the school struck a student on the shoulder because he was irritated that the student had pushed the elevator bell repeatedly, the report said. Although the incident was reported to a staff member, there was no investigation, the report said.

Ms. Gerenser said the elevator operator was actually a 21-year-old retarded man hired for that position. The student was about the same age, and the two men had a small scrap, she said.

"The investigators knew that but they chose not to put it in the report," she said. "We did an investigation, and no abuse had occurred."

■ The report contained an allegation that a staff member had physically and verbally abused a client on Jan. 1, 1995, but the incident was not reported until another staff member did so on Feb. 16 of that year. Although there was a finding that the allegation was substantiated, the staffer continued to work until the state intervened much later. She was transferred, and later terminated after a parent complained of her continued employment, the report said.

Ms. Gerenser said this was another group home issue, which she could not specifically address.

■ On April 27, 1995, four assistant teachers at the school reported that one of the teachers had been abusing the children in her classroom for the past several months. They reported that the teacher had used hot mustard applied to the tongue of one student who spits, and that she struck another student with her hand. She also allegedly shoved a child with force into the radiator after he knocked over food, and struck another student across the face. Although the original allegations in this case were made on April 27, 1995, the investigation did not begin until May 8, 1995. The staffer was suspended. The families of the individuals were not notified, the report said.

Ms. Gerenser said the allegations were actually made on May 4, and the school acted upon them immediately. In contrast to what the report stated, all the parents were notified, she said. Only the mustard incident could be substantiated. The employee was immediately suspended and subsequently terminated, she said.

■ In Aug. 1993 a staffer allegedly observed another staff member use a "half-Nelson" wrestling hold to force a student to go to the gym when he didn't want to go. The staff member then sustained the hold to force the student to run around the gym. There is no record of any investigation or action, the report said.

Ms. Gerenser said the student is actually 21 years of age and has a penchant for running out of the building unsupervised, which she said could lead to his injury. In this case, the staffer caught the student doing so, and applied an "approved restraint." The rest of the accusation was unsubstantiated, she said.