

## **Program Facility Background: Prairie Harbor, LLC**

### **Monitors' Visit Prairie Harbor, LLC / ID# 1577796**

#### **Facility Description**

Located at 7146 SH 60 in Wallis, Texas, Prairie Harbor (or the facility) is comprised of five independent structures, including two one-story buildings with residential quarters: "A-House" with a capacity for thirty-one youth and "B-House" with a capacity for thirty-five youth. A modular building (portable) between the two houses provides office space. Three other separate modular buildings at the rear grounds of the facility accommodate the on-site school.

The facility is licensed to serve up to eighty-eight boys and girls ages five through seventeen. Prairie Harbor is licensed to serve children with emotional disturbances.

#### **Overall Facility Standards Compliance**

The monitoring team reviewed Prairie Harbor's standards compliance history from May 1, 2018 to May 1, 2020, revealing that the State evaluated 492 standards. The State issued seventy-two citations and provided forty-seven instances of Technical Assistance (TA). Some of the more concerning citations and TA included:

- Three citations for inappropriate restraints and four instances of related TA. Two of the three cited restraints involved physical force and use of a restraint by bending a youth's limbs behind their back;
- Nine citations for inappropriate discipline (one for corporal punishment) and fourteen instances of related TA; and
- Nineteen citations for neglectful supervision and twenty-nine instances of related TA.

#### **Probation Status**

The State placed this facility on probation effective February 5, 2019, with no identified end date. The basis for the Probation includes use of inappropriate discipline of children, lack of supervision of children, corporal punishment of children, and abuse and neglect of children. As of May 19, 2020, the program had not yet met the first four conditions of the Probation.

#### **RTB Findings for Abuse or Neglect**

Prairie Harbor has had three confirmed findings for abuse and neglect over the last five years:

- Two (2017 & 2019) related to a staff member who had an "inappropriate sexual relationship" with youth at the facility.
- One from 2019 (pending appeal) involving a staff who allegedly used excessive force during a restraint, resulting in the child's arm being broken.

## **Program Facility Background: Prairie Harbor, LLC**

### **Monitoring Visit**

#### Awake-Night Visit

The monitoring team conducted a five-day, on-site monitoring visit of the Prairie Harbor facility in late February 2020. The monitoring team arrived unannounced at approximately 11:45pm to conduct an awake-night verification and stayed until 12:45am.

Upon arrival, the monitoring team divided into two groups to simultaneously enter both houses. The front door to both homes was unlocked, enabling unnoticed entry to the foyers. Each of the foyers included minimal offices, a reception area, office equipment, and other administrative items. Several documents containing client identifying information were visible across tables. A second unlocked door in the foyer served as the final entrance to each house. To maintain privacy, the monitoring team repeatedly knocked on the doors, but was unable to attract anyone's attention.

After no success, the monitoring team reunited in the foyer of A-House and attempted to contact personnel via telephone numbers collected before the visit. When those attempts failed, the monitoring team called the emergency contact lines posted on the walls of the foyers. This also proved to be fruitless. Having exhausted all options, the monitoring team opened the second door of A-House to find an on-call staff member sleeping on a sofa in a large room. Once awake, the staff member informed the monitoring team to proceed to the locked sleeping unit doors and knock to gain entrance. At that point, the monitoring team was able to gain entrance to the housing units where staff were awake and monitoring youth.

Caregivers provided a walk-through of their assigned units, during which staff articulated and demonstrated how they perform room checks, i.e. reportedly every five to fifteen minutes depending on the supervision needs of the youth. Staff reported they monitor youth on close supervision every five minutes. Staff are expected to document each room check on a log, as required by Prairie Harbor policy.

#### Day-Time Tour

The first full day of the visit, the monitoring team conducted a walk-through of the entire facility's premises, including the living quarters, school, recreation area, and administrative offices. Each house is divided into two units. Each housing unit contains multiple rooms that can accommodate three to four youth per room. Children's bedrooms contain both metal-frame bunk beds and metal-frame twin size beds. Each bed includes a pillow, an institutional mattress, a sheet, and a blanket.

Children store personal items in either a wooden or plastic box that can fit under a bed, or they use an open "cubby": open shelving fastened to a wall of the bedroom. Seemingly due to limited storage space, items also lined the floor along the baseboards in many rooms.

Some bedrooms have a Jack-and-Jill restroom shared between them, with doors entering from each room. Other bedrooms are within proximity of a communal restroom located in a common area. Most bathrooms were clean despite heavy mold stains. Pictured below, a wooden box encompassed the porcelain toilet in one of the bathrooms.

**Program Facility Background: Prairie Harbor, LLC**

Very little natural light enters through the minimal windows in each of the two houses, resulting in dark living quarters. The monitoring team observed overhead lighting throughout the living quarters. The monitoring team also noted many items in need of repair: for example, a ceiling fan missing several fan blades, dirty air vents, doors in the housing units with many dents, and the floors in the housing units so worn in places that bare concrete was exposed. Pictured below, one of the youth's bathrooms had no mirrors for personal grooming. Smoke detectors in both houses malfunctioned for several days, causing a continual, intermittent high-pitched chirping sound throughout the houses.



The dayrooms were sparsely equipped, and much of the furniture appeared to be in poor condition, e.g., couches with missing cushions. Each house has locked kitchens and medicine closets.

There is a large fenced outdoor area (yard) behind each house with a fence between the two houses. The outdoor area is equipped with picnic tables, basketball courts, and recreation equipment.

Children attend school provided by Brazos Independent School District (ISD) in three portable buildings across the back yards at the rear of the property. Brazos ISD designates this campus as an Alternative School. The portable buildings appeared old and were not in very good repair.

### Program Facility Background: Prairie Harbor, LLC

Tables line the walls of the small windowless classrooms, with an open area at the center. Desktop computers are made available to students where they sit facing the walls and their backs to the center of the room. All educational services are online. Brazos ISD provides the instructional services, while facility caregivers provide supervision in the classrooms.



The only copies of the notice on how to report Abuse or Neglect and how to contact the Foster Care Ombudsman's office were printed on an 8.5" x 11" piece of paper and posted above the door exiting the building and in the kitchen where youth do not frequent.

#### Monitoring Team Interviews and File Reviews

On site, the monitoring team reviewed:

- Thirty-six PMC child files, and
- Twenty-one employee files.

On site, the monitoring team conducted:

- Five awake-night staff interviews,
- Sixteen child interviews,<sup>1</sup>
- Seven staff interviews,
- One treatment director interview, and
- Two administrator interviews.

The youth who were interviewed were relatively evenly split when asked how they liked living at Prairie Harbor: six youth reported that they did not like it (37.5%), four youth reported that it was "okay" (25%), and six youth reported that they liked it (37.5%). Sixty-seven percent of youth interviewed (10) reported feeling physically safe at Prairie Harbor, with four youth (29%) indicating that there was someone on campus that made them feel unsafe. Feelings related to safety seemed to be tied to youth reports of bullying and fighting between youth. All of the youth interviewed indicated that fights between youth took place on campus, and all but one indicated that fights took place in the children's dorms. None of the youth indicated that they had ever been spanked or hit by a staff person at Prairie Harbor. Two youth indicated that they had been hit by another youth. Of the fourteen youth who answered the question, eight (57%) reported having been restrained at Prairie Harbor.

The file reviews and interviews revealed the following trends:

---

<sup>1</sup> Not all youth completed the interviews. One youth opted to end the interview after answering just a few questions. Another youth was so unfocused that the monitoring team ended the interview with the youth early.

### Program Facility Background: Prairie Harbor, LLC

1. Youth on Youth Fights: Youth interviewed related numerous fighting incidents and girls getting jumped.
2. Physical Environment in Disrepair: Staff noted that facility leadership does not timely replace items that are broken or in disrepair. To ensure youth have access to safe and suitable items, staff reported they often purchase items for children out of their own pockets. For example, one staff member stated that they bought a TV to provide youth with entertainment.
3. Privacy and Sexual Acting Out: Youth reported that the Jack-and-Jill bathrooms enable them to knowingly and unknowingly enter the restroom with other residents present. One youth-related inappropriate sexual touching taking place in the restrooms.
4. Overworked Staff: Prairie Harbor policy requires staff to work long hours on consecutive days, sometimes up to four days. Staff shared that they are exhausted by the fourth day, which inhibits their ability to properly care for the youth.
5. Lack of Education: Teachers were not present in two of the classrooms during three of the days the monitoring team visited, and Brazos ISD did not provide substitutes. Students were not engaged in education. Instead, they played cards and computer games, talked with their fellow students, or slept on the floor under their desks. High school students do not receive a report card, and there is no method to calculate Grade Point Averages. It also did not appear that CPS is attending the Admission, Review, and Dismissal meetings for the youth who receive special education services. There was no natural light in any of the classrooms as the window were all covered.



### **Program Facility Background: Prairie Harbor, LLC**

6. Programming: Several staff members and the treatment director reported a lack of programming (activities) and knowledge about keeping youth safe. The facility provides minimal therapy, trauma informed care, or positive behavioral support plans.
7. Reports FCO and Abuse Hotline: During and upon the conclusion of the on-site visit, the monitoring team assisted two youth with calls to the Foster Care Ombudsman and were transferred to make reports to SWI. The Monitors also made two additional calls to SWI based on observations during the site visit.
8. Sanitation Issue: The facility enclosed or were in the process of enclosing porcelain toilets with unsealed wooden boxes, creating a health risk because the wood cannot be sanitized. Staff informed the monitoring team that the boxes are intended to prevent youth from breaking the commodes to use the pieces to self-harm. The staff stated the facility could not use stainless-steel commodes because the pipes are not compatible.

### **Complaints Called in to SWI By Monitors and Outcomes**

The Monitoring Team made or helped youth make five reports to SWI. Two involved allegations of inappropriate restraints resulting in injuries. Two youth reported getting jumped and bullied by other children and being injured by other children. Another child reported that she did not feel safe because she feared she might harm herself, but that staff did not take her seriously when she talked with them about her fears. Another female youth reported children engaged in sexual contact with each other in the bathroom when male staff are on duty, knowing male staff could not come into the bathroom to intervene.

As of May 19, 2020, the State investigations resulting from most of the reports made by the Monitors in February 2020 were still pending. However, the allegations related to inappropriate sexual conduct between youth<sup>2</sup> resulted in a RCCL citation for failure to provide the level of supervision necessary to ensure each child's safety and well-being.

### **Alleged Perpetrator Trends**

The monitoring team reviewed the histories of the three staff members named as alleged perpetrators in the four cases the monitoring team reported to SWI, revealing one staff member with a significant history.

- Staff One: Reported to SWI by the monitoring team for inappropriate restraint. This was the fifth time since 2009 that Staff 1 was reported for inappropriately restraining youth. Two of these incidents resulted in HHSC citing the facility for EBI. This staff has been identified as an alleged perpetrator a total of fourteen times since 2009, resulting in three minimum standards violations, but no RTB determinations for child abuse or neglect.

---

<sup>2</sup> This investigation was linked to another investigation.