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## Economy Killing Abusive Teen Programs

*Below is a guest blog entry by MoJo author Maia Szalavitz:*

There is a silver lining to this bleak economy: Abusive and ineffective "tough love" programs for teens are failing right and left.

In just the last few weeks, the notorious Tranquility Bay program in Jamaica, Spring Creek Lodge in Montana, and Pathway Family Center in Detroit and Ohio have all been shuttered.

Tranquility Bay was known for making kids kneel on concrete for days, using "restraint" so harsh that it broke bones. Both Tranquility Bay and Spring Creek Lodge were part of a network called the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASP or WWASPS)—and the group's philosophy involves constant use of emotional attacks and humiliation in a rigid, structured day in order to break teens' spirits.

Spring Creek was notorious for a frigid, small isolation room called "the Hobbit"—sometimes teens were left there for months.

From Pathway—which was descended from the infamously abusive Straight Inc.—I received two separate accounts of suicide attempts by girls which were not reported to their parents, and many stories of the usual attack therapy and humiliation. Unfortunately, neither WWASP nor Pathway is completely dead yet: WWASP still has centers operating in the US and abroad, and Pathway has sites in Indiana: Porter and Indianapolis.

The media tends to present these closures as sad examples of needed services being cut—but in fact, teens are better off with no treatment than with treatment that often divides families and has characteristics known to produce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Family support tends to be crucial to long term recovery—and PTSD doubles the odds that a drug problem will become a lasting addiction.

Troubled teen programs were yet another sign of the bubble economy. Many were financed by mortgage and home equity loans because they cost thousands of dollars a month and because insurers, quite correctly, don't usually pay for programs that aren't proven to help.

Since there are proven alternatives for teens with drug and other problems that do not carry the risks of "tough love," we should greet the closings of these centers with glee.

And those who care about this issue should keep the pressure on so that the wounded programs finally die. After all, there are still teens suffering inside, being "treated" without dignity or respect—some of whom were just transferred from closed programs to other similar, sites.

Legislation to ban the most egregious practices is coming—and may well be strengthened now that the Democrats control Congress and the White House. But an even better outcome would be for the "troubled teen" industry to wither and be replaced by what the evidence shows works: community-based, family-centered, minimally restrictive, and youth-driven care.

*Maia Szalavitz is the author of "Help At Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids," and Senior Fellow at stats.org.*

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