

HFC Committee

From: Laakea Maui <friendsforlaakea@yahoo.com>
Sent: Thursday, October 08, 2020 7:59 AM
To: HFC Committee
Subject: Testimony: La'akea

I am hoping that this may do some good. The 'Friends for La'akea' letter was my idea as there were countless people who wanted a way to speak up. I was hired at La'akea in 2019 and during my tenure there I became aware that things were not what they seemed. I had noticed a laxness, no structure, no accountability. Shortly before the onslaught of Covid-19 one fellow employee voiced their concern to me that La'akea was merely a front for something else; a facility pretending to work with clients with intellectual and physical disabilities but whose real goal was to establish a commune based on monies received for client services with current executive director Sarah Menzies at the helm.

What began to emerge was a pervasive New Age, community-building program and attitude they claimed to be based on the teaching of Rudolph Steiner without any actual teachings from him or for working with those with physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities. ^[1]_{SEP} What they called an "innovative approach" was really a program geared more to the needs of the DSW's (called "mentors" at La'akea) than to the actual participants.

As it is with any new job I began with high hopes and the wish to do good with an underserved population. I quickly realized that the vast majority of the mentors had no training and had no real idea of what autism and down syndrome entailed. Management provide no real education. I noticed that mentors were immature, inexperienced and lacked any real life experience with a few exceptions. Many of the so-called activities, a New Age morning circle, meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, non-violent communication were geared to be for the benefit of the staff, not the participants.

Management allowed mentors to do whatever they wanted as long as they did not try to leave the facility which included inappropriate massage and the treating some participants as comedic relief, often degrading their dignity. There was absolutely no practical training of mentors. I had pointed out on several occasions to my supervisor that I thought participants were not being treated with dignity or being approached in a therapeutic manner. The pecking order at La'akea became clear: Maintaining the salary structure of top heavy management, making the mentors feel like they were part of the commune and then, the participants, a tertiary concern.

This from a fellow DSW/ mentor via confidential communication:
She immediately started saying she was over it (working at La'akea) and wants to speak up. She said when there is meditation in the morning she cant relate to and keeps her eyes open. She said it lasts like 10 minutes and all the hippies are doing their mediating thing and all the clients are not participating at all. She says there are 3 mandatory meditations per day and that it is not for the clients it is for the staff and the clients are not into it at all. She says she's fed up with the poor care for the clients well-being. She said the priority at La'akea has nothing to do with quality for the lives of the clients. She said classes are for the benefit of the staff and their commune and usually the clients wander off while the staff keep doing their yoga or hula...and when the class ends the staff go looking for their clients.

She said it is so wrong how the staff talk down to the clients or talk baby talk to them. She feels there is no training. She said when she first came to work at La'akea prior to Sarah Menzies taking over former employees Mo, Cathy, Flo, Taysia, Mahea, Phyllis were still working there she was thinking that La'akea was a good place to be for both staff and participants. She said once all of the above people left and her time there continued she said she would never want to be there as a disabled person. She feels it is the incompetence of the management that has resulted in the quality declining to where she doesn't want to work there anymore.

There have been numerous labor related complaints filed by former employees to state agencies as well as complaints about fiscal improprieties including alleged forgeries and abuses of Medicaid waivers.

Participants are not treated in accordance with the statement below:

The purpose of Waiver services according to the DOH Medicaid Waiver standards is:

Mission: Foster partnerships and provide quality person-centered and family-focused services and supports that promote self-determination. [L] [SEP]

Guiding Principles: Individuals:

1. are treated with respect and dignity, [L] [SEP]
2. make their own choices, [L] [SEP]
3. participate fully in the community, [L] [SEP]
4. have opportunities to realize their goals including economic self-sufficiency,
- [L] [SEP] 5. achieve positive outcomes through individualized services and natural supports, and
6. are empowered to live self-determined lives.

I am told by staff that prior to Covid-19 it was a venerable mess every day at the La'akea facility as the staff that cared about the clients began to have unrest and began challenging the cult behavior that was going on and how the priority was supposed to be the clients. There appears to be a divide there. Staff were told you're either with us or you're against us and if you're against us you will no longer work here. I was never shown a grievance procedure, whistle blower's policy. I was never given an employee HR handbook when I was hired and according to newer staff they were not given one either.

There is much more to this story and there are documents and attachments that can be provided. [L] [SEP]
The final thought I would like to leave you with is this:

If my child had a developmental or physical disability La'akea would be the last place I'd want them to be.

Andy Gross
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