

**Committee:** UNHRC

**Topic:** Ethics of the Troubled Teen Industry



**Theme of AUSMUN 2024**

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The theme for this year's AUSMUN is "Forging Tomorrow with Yesterday's Lessons". Dating back to 500 BC, great minds such as Confucius have spread this ideal: "Study the past, if you would divine the future". During a typical Model United Nations conference, delegates are expected to learn from their country's past and, in many cases, actively rewrite it. Historical knowledge when used effectively can lead to informed decisions; by reflecting on what has and has not worked in the past, collectively we are able to gain perspective on current and future policy. We encourage delegates to keep this ideal in mind while wrestling with the nuances and complications inherent in the ideas of modern day problems.

AUSMUN is committed to actively serving its community and combating pressing issues. As we continue to expand in numbers, we further seek to expand our positive impact on the world around us. We are proud to announce that we have partnered with Dress for Success, a non-profit organization that enables women to become economically independent by offering professional clothing, a network of support, and the resources necessary for both personal and professional growth. By participating in AUSMUN 2024, in addition to debating "model" policy, you are actively bettering society and changing the world.

The 2024 AUSMUN board is honored to host all delegates for our largest conference yet. We cannot wait to see what delegates bring forward to each committee in their efforts to embody values of collaboration and this year's theme. Looking twenty twenty-forward to seeing you!

## Rationale

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The Troubled Teen Industry aims to treat various behavioral and mental disturbances among young populations, an issue that has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. While many programs are praised for their care and success, the industry has also faced many scandals of abuse, corruption, and death, partially due to the lack of federal or state laws monitoring them. Adolescence is a critical stage of development because of the many significant physical, cognitive, and emotional changes that occur. Because of this, teenage years are often a time of mental and behavioral turmoil that, at extremes, are beyond the capacity of loved ones to handle on their own. Teenagers who struggle with behavioral or mental health challenges are at risk of falling behind their peers and causing harm to themselves or others, and they may require support from psychological and counseling professionals. The debate over the ethics of such guidance arises when teens are forced into potentially harmful environments within the industry, jeopardizing their well-being and diminishing their successful rehabilitation. The troubled teen industry often operates with minimal regulation, leading to potential abuses of power and exploitation as well as specific therapies that constitute child neglect or abuse. Discussing ethics brings attention to the need for better oversight and regulation to protect the rights and well-being of teenagers in these programs. Child neglect and abuse in this industry can manifest as seclusion, group attack therapy, gay conversion therapy, and denial of basic human needs. These programs allow parents to dictate their child's treatment without realizing or understanding the potentially traumatic experiences their child may undergo. This industry has the potential to improve the lives of teens and their loved ones, but it can also create unethical and damaging experiences that have long-lasting effects on the mental, physical, and emotional

health of these adolescents. By discussing the ethics of the troubled teen industry, we raise awareness among the general public about the potential risks and abuses occurring within these programs. This can lead to advocacy efforts to improve conditions for troubled teens and hold unethical organizations accountable.

## **Background**

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The first youth rehabilitation centers for “troubled teens” were opened in the 1950s and were often strongly religiously affiliated. Before this, however, the first known wilderness program, Outward Bound, opened for young teens in the 1940s (Teen Wilderness Therapy). It functioned as a disciplinary center for students who attended Brigham Young University in Utah, affiliated with the Mormon church. The purpose of the program was to teach outdoor survival skills to students at risk of expulsion from the university. Those who were unsuccessful in the program would lose their spot at school. This contributed to setting the standard for modern wilderness therapy programs by incorporating a system heavily based on outdoor survival, often pushing participants to physical and psychological extremes. Another infamous instance of abuse in a therapeutic program that set standards for the industry is the North American Synanon cult. This cult was started by a recovered alcoholic named Charles Deidrich and was opened to recovering addicts who sought salvation (Cult of Synanon). This cult was very organized and championed self-reliance for its members to teach them to learn from their mistakes. However, this organization quickly became violent and after several cases of torture and deaths of children and teens within the cult were reported, it was dissolved around the 1990s. More recently, in the 2000s, a wilderness therapy program called Challenger Foundation was forced to file for

bankruptcy and close down after horrifying survivor stories were revealed. Challenger Foundation had extreme wilderness therapy courses for “troubled teens,” which included hundreds of mile-long hikes with heavy backpacks and minimal breaks (Challenger Foundation). Teenagers who were put through the program and survived often went home traumatized from the lack of privacy and the fear they faced each day in the program. Unfortunately, this is the reality of many “troubled teens” who attend wilderness programs. While caregivers are assured their children are in good hands, there is often a lack of transparency regarding the living conditions, daily activities, and staff-patient relationships of the facilities. Although these issues have been improved with the opening of more modern wilderness programs in the United States, there are still many problems with the troubled teen industry that must be addressed and solved to protect the current and future generations of young adults.

### **Contemporary Evidence**

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The troubled teen industry in the United States is a multibillion-dollar industry with more than 10,000 facilities across the country. At any given time, hundreds of thousands of children are estimated to be currently residing in troubled teen facilities (Krebs). These programs offer hope to desperate parents looking for a solution to psychological disturbances and disorders in their teens. For many, these treatment facilities offer vital, even lifesaving support to families who feel they have exhausted every other option. However, these programs have also faced significant criticism and concern in recent decades— with the quality of care provided by these facilities coming under fire after numerous reports of psychological and physical abuse and negligence have come to light. Survivors say that they experienced traumatic “kidnapping” to the

facilities, inhumane and unsanitary conditions, lack of healthcare, and sexual and physical abuse, with many receiving PTSD diagnoses after their stays (Okoren). When confronted with complaints of mistreatment, facilities will frequently let go of the staff responsible for the grievance rather than fix the systemic problem within the operation. Additionally, while some corporations have been shut down for cases of abuse or negligence, it is not uncommon for them to reopen under a new name or merge with another company to rebrand without actually implementing reform.

Perhaps even more alarming are the more than 300 deaths documented in the troubled teen industry since the 1970s, nearly all of which were preventable (Kutz). Many worry that despite their claims to help heal participants, these programs could be doing more harm than good— in some cases posing a significant threat to their health and wellbeing. Additionally, the financial burden of these treatment facilities on these families can be immense, sometimes costing thousands of dollars a day (Myers). Oftentimes, these corporations are also accused of deceptive advertising: presenting an unrealistic and overly positive representation of their programs or even overtly lying about the activities and treatments they provide (Kutz).

Despite the rising awareness and concern regarding the troubled teen industry, very little has been done to regulate it on a national level. In fact, there is currently no federal legislation that directly targets or upholds a standard of care in these facilities (Tsisin). Due to the lack of national oversight, the responsibility for this regulation has primarily fallen to individual states and local agencies, where their oversight can easily fall through the cracks. While some states have passed regulations on the industry, they remain inconsistent and poorly enforced. For example, Utah, often considered the epicenter of the issue, passed a law in 2021 that prohibited chemical sedation and mechanical restraints unless approved by the Utah Office of Licensing but

failed to address emotionally abusive practices or the process of addressing mistreatment allegations. There have been many efforts to pass federal legislation such as the ICAA and the Congregate Care Act which have garnered public support, but they have yet to come to fruition (Evans).

There is no doubt that many troubled teen facilities offer valuable services that truly benefit their clients, and many of these places act as lifelines for desperate teens and families with few places left to turn. However, the lack of regulation and oversight in the industry cannot be ignored. For an industry that so deeply impacts the lives of already vulnerable youth, it is imperative that new ways are found to safeguard against abuse and ensure that these facilities are fulfilling their true purpose: to help, not harm.

## **Directive**

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The troubled teen industry includes various programs and facilities aimed at addressing behavioral, emotional, and psychological challenges in young adults and teens. While these programs have the potential to provide valuable support and healing, there are also extensive concerns regarding the safety and well-being of participants. In preparation, delegates are expected to conduct meaningful research on the issue and gain a nuanced understanding of their position. All are encouraged to come to the committee with an open mind, ready to collaborate and compromise. Delegates should consider these questions while preparing to debate.

1. What regulations, if any, should be enacted at the federal level to manage wilderness therapy programs across the United States?
2. Should these regulations vary across different regions, and if so, how?

3. What standards should be in place to ensure the quality of care provided to adolescents in troubled teen programs?
4. What qualifications and training should staff members in troubled teen programs possess to effectively support the needs of adolescents?
5. How should restrictions and regulations on wilderness therapy programs be enforced? By whom should they be enforced?
6. How should facilities and governments address instances of reported abuse or negligence?
7. How can these facilities be held accountable for providing greater transparency surrounding their programs to both families and the public?

## **Delegate Resources**

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[Wilderness Therapy Camps](#)

[The Troubled Teen Industry and its Effects](#)

[Abuse in the Troubled Teen Industry](#)

[Instances of Death, Abuse, and Deceptive Marketing in the Troubled Teen Industry](#)

[Former Campers Describe Harsh Introduction to Trails Carolina](#)

[A 12-Year-Old Died at Wilderness Therapy Program: He's Not the First](#)

[The Troubled Teen Industry's Troubling Lack of Oversight](#)

[A Booming Industry in Utah](#)

## **Delegations**

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- 1. Ascent Behavioral Health** - Ascent Behavioral Health is a mental health and addiction treatment provider offering inpatient and outpatient services. Ascent closed its facilities in Arkansas after a child in their care was left in a van and died. Additionally, cuts to Medicaid for behavioral and mental health in the industry have been linked to Ascent.

[Ascent Arkansas facilities close](#)

[Ascent Behavioral Health](#)

- 2. Aspen Education Group** - The Aspen Education Group is a network of therapeutic boarding schools, residential treatment centers, and wilderness therapy programs for troubled teens and young adults. There is a lack of oversight and regulation in the therapeutic boarding school industry, including in Aspen Education Group facilities. This lack of regulation has raised concerns about the quality of care and safety of the students enrolled in these programs. These programs have been accused of isolation and control tactics as well as financial exploitation.

[Aspen Education Group](#)

[Survivors of wilderness therapy camps describe trauma, efforts to end abuses](#)

- 3. The Association for Experiential Education-** The AEE is a nonprofit membership organization and accreditor that advocates for experimental



education and mental health services. It became America's first recognized accreditor for adventure education programs, with its standards becoming widely accepted across the industry. AEE recently added an accreditation program focused specifically on Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare such as troubled teen wilderness camps.

[Organization Website](#)

[Wilderness Therapy Certification](#)

- 4. Breaking Code Silence-** Breaking Code Silence is a nonprofit organization that represents those who faced abuse in the troubled teen industry. This work is done by spreading awareness, conducting investigative research, and advocating for protective legislation. This organization was one of the leading voices in the creation of the Congregate Care Act.

[BCS Website](#)

[Congregate Care Act](#)

- 5. Charles Dederich -** Charles Dederich was a recovered alcoholic who started a reformatory drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in the 1950s. His main focus in starting this center was harsh discipline that later became violent. This center eventually gained religious affiliation and morphed into the cult Synanon, which grew to enforce strict membership and conformity and resulted in the deaths of multiple members.

[What Happened to Synanon Founder Charles Dederich?](#)

[Charles Dederich](#)

- 6. Circle of Hope Girls' Ranch-** The Circle of Hope Girls Ranch is a religiously affiliated all-girls reform boarding school for troubled teens. The school has faced numerous reports of severe emotional and physical abuse and is now undergoing legal investigation. Their trial is set to take place in September of this year (2024).

[History of the School](#)

[Abuse Allegations](#)

- 7. The Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities-** CARF is a national nonprofit organization that acts as an independent accreditor for health and human services, including troubled teen facilities and programs. They aim to uphold standards in the treatment industry- ensuring that facilities are both safe and effective. However, some have accused third-party accreditors of troubled teen facilities, such as this one, of being too lax.

[Overview and Controversies](#)

[CARF Website](#)

- 8. Dr. Phil McGraw -** Dr. Phil is a well-known psychologist and author known for his talk show that discusses many topics including troubled teens. Many segments on his show discuss troubled teens and interventions for them and their families. Critics have raised concerns about the ethics and effectiveness of some

interventions featured on Dr. Phil's show, especially when it comes to highly confrontational approaches.

[Dr. Phil alleges abuse at treatment camp](#)

[Troubled US teens left traumatized by tough love camps](#)

- 9. Evoke Entrada-** Evoke Entrada is a wilderness therapy program for troubled teens and a strong advocate of adventure therapy. However, the program has faced some criticism for abusive or neglected practices, including a lack of basic hygiene and the violation of patient rights. The program, however, remains open and successful despite these allegations.

[Evoke Entrada Website](#)

[Abuse Allegations](#)

[Testimonials](#)

- 10. Intermountain Children's Hospital -** Intermountain Children's Hospital is based in Salt Lake City, Utah, and has over 33 clinics across the United States. This hospital provides medical and surgical care for children. In addition, the facility has resources for children struggling with complex illnesses and mental health issues.

[Campaign to Reimagine Pediatric Care](#)

[A New Era of Pediatric Healthcare](#)

- 11. Kayla Muzquiz -** Kayla Muzquiz is a survivor of the troubled teen industry and the foster care system. She and her sister were sent to for-profit mental health

facilities out of state after escaping being in the custody of their abusive father. Muzquiz had a traumatic experience going through the programs and speaks about the neglect she faced and how it affected her.

[It's Time to End the "Troubled Teen Industry"](#)

[I'm A Proud Pitbull](#)

**12. Mountain Bachelor Academy** - The Mountain Bachelor Academy was a therapeutic boarding school with wilderness therapy incorporated into it. Allegations against this academy include the reenactment of their different forms of abuse in front of their peers and staff. An Oregon organization found nine confirmed allegations of abuse and ordered the closure of this academy.

[Oregon Mental Health Archive](#)

[Elizabeth at MBA](#)

**13. National Disability Rights Network** - The National Disability Rights Network has been involved in advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities within various contexts, including those related to troubled teens and the treatment industry. This network has become involved in cases where the rights of youth with disabilities are violated within these programs. This can include assistance in allegations of abuse or neglect, advocacy for improved standards and regulations governing such facilities, and legal representation for people who have experienced harm or discrimination.

[Protection and Advocacy for People with Disabilities](#)

[Investigation on Serious Abuse for Youth](#)

[Desperation without Dignity](#)

**14. National Youth Rights Association** - The National Youth Rights Association is an organization aimed at protecting the rights of the youth. NYRA advocates for troubled teens who face legal issues or unfair treatment within the legal system. They ensure access to legal representation, fair trials, and protection from abusive practices like solitary confinement.

[NYRA](#)

[The "Troubled Teen" Industry](#)

**15. Newport Academy**- Newport Academy is a treatment center for troubled teens that offers multiple levels of care around the country. The center is a strong advocate for the use of wilderness therapy and believes it can be an effective treatment method when properly regulated. However, many past patients have reported abusive experiences in the facility.

[Newport's View on Wilderness Therapy](#)

[Newport Academy History](#)

**16. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services** - The NC Department for Health and Human Services is responsible for ensuring the health and well-being of the citizens of North Carolina. After finding several legal violations and a death at Trails Carolina, an investigation began. The department

revoked its license, showing the authority and effectiveness of enforcing regulations.

[NCDHHS Revokes Trails Carolina License](#)

[NCDHHS Overview](#)

**17. Outback Therapeutic Expeditions** - Outback Therapeutic Expeditions was a wilderness therapy program that was founded by Aspen Education Group. It operated in Utah and was closed down recently due to reported cases of neglect and abuse within the program. There were also reports of rising prices for enrollment tuition and gear.

[Outback Therapeutic Expeditions](#)

[Outback Therapeutic Expeditions - Closed](#)

**18. Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Research Center** - Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare is a research center focused on proving the effectiveness of outdoor behavioral healthcare treatment, including wilderness therapy programs through evidence-based studies. Additionally, it has contributed to the development of safety practices and standards in the wilderness therapy industry. It promotes accreditation and risk management in these facilities.

[Outdoor Behavioral Council](#)

[OBH's Response to Allegations of Abuse in the Wilderness Therapy](#)

[Industry](#)

19. **Outward Bound-** Outward Bound, the first known wilderness therapy program, was founded in Wales in 1941. Though the program began in the UK, it now has 38 schools on 6 different continents and has inspired many copycats across the globe. The programs remain successful, using a variety of treatment philosophies to treat troubled teenagers.

[Outward Bound Website](#)

[General History](#)

20. **Paris Hilton -** Paris Hilton, granddaughter of the owner of Hilton Hotels, spent a lot of time in schools for troubled teens. She attended Provo Canyon School where she encountered various forms of abuse such as solitary confinement and physical and mental abuse. The time she spent at this school contributed to her trust issues, affecting her relationships to this day.

[Who is Paris Hilton?](#)

[Paris Hilton's Utah Boarding School](#)

21. **Sara Gelser Blouin -** Sara Gelser Blouin is a state senator for Oregon who worked to make Oregon the first and only state to implement protective measures for children being transported across state lines. She helped pass Senate Bill 710, which enacts requirements for secure transport by licensed professionals for all children being taken to educational facilities in Oregon.

[State Laws Aim to Regulate TTI](#)

[Senator Sara Gelser Blouin](#)

**22. Sarah Stusek** - Sarah Stusek is a survivor of the troubled teen industry and author of *Three Rivers*, a nonfiction novel about a girl who was sent to the Three Rivers wilderness therapy program. Stusek shares her daunting experiences while in the camp and now advocates against wilderness therapy programs altogether.

[Sarah Stusek - Treatment Camp](#)

[Sarah Stusek - Three Rivers](#)

**23. Sequel** - Sequel Youth & Family Services was a chain of treatment programs that took in and tried to help troubled kids from all over the United States. Former members of Sequel facilities have raised concerns about poor living conditions, inadequate staffing, and inappropriate treatment practices. Cornelius Fredericks, a 16-year-old resident of Sequel, became outraged and led investigations into the facility's programs. Fredericks died after being restrained by staff members, and his death was ruled a homicide.

[Sequel Youth & Family Services Youth Abuse Investigation](#)

[Company claimed to help troubled youth closed](#)

**24. SUWS of the Carolinas** - The SUWS of the Carolinas was a wilderness therapy program that was permanently closed due to staff members using excessive physical force or restraint techniques on participants, often forcefully restraining participants, physically punishing them, or denying them access to basic needs such as food, water, or shelter. This program also dealt with inadequate



supervision, lack of proper medical care, and failure to address participants' basic needs for safety and well-being.

[SUWS of the Carolinas Closing](#)

[SUWS Testimony](#)

**25. Synanon** - Synanon initially was formed as a drug-rehabilitation program but eventually developed into a cult. Over time, Synanon's practices became increasingly extreme and controlling. Members endured intense indoctrination, and dissent was often punished through public humiliation or physical violence. Synanon also had aggressive recruitment tactics and isolated members from their families and outside influences. This cult was most known for a tactic called Group Attack Therapy, when a member is verbally abused, denounced, or humiliated by the therapist or other members of the group.

[Syanon Wikepedia.](#)

[From Rehab to Cult](#)

**26. Three Rivers Wilderness Therapy Camp** - Three Rivers Wilderness Program was operated in Bozeman, Montana and had over 400 troubled teens go through the program. It was a nonprofit organization, and after a few scandals, their admission rate dropped significantly. This forced the program to close down permanently.

[Three Rivers Montana to Close](#)

[Three Rivers Montana](#)

**27. Trails Carolina** - Trails Carolina is a wilderness therapy program with goals of helping to rehabilitate troubled teens. While they advertise a nurturing environment and safe community for young adults sent to them, Trails has been involved in several scandals including the death place of several teenage boys and girls sent to the program.

[Trails Carolina's "Mission"](#)

[Former Campers at Trails Carolina](#)

[Children Removed from Therapy Camp Following Recent Death](#)

**28. United States Government Accountability Office (GAO)** - The U.S.

Government Accountability Office speaks out against residential programs such as wilderness therapy programs that are abusive and neglectful. Keeping human rights in mind, the GAO is responsible for identifying cases of wilderness programs negatively affecting children's mental health and lives and taking action to regulate them or shut them down.

[Selected Cases of Death, Abuse, and Deceptive Marketing](#)

[Concerns Regarding Residential Treatment Programs](#)

**29. Unsilenced-** Unsilenced is a nonprofit organization that aims to raise awareness about abuse in the troubled teen industry and advocate for youth rights. They conduct research on institutionalized abuse, lead advocacy campaigns, and push

for protective legislation. Originally an afterschool group, the program has grown to help hundreds of kids across the country.

[Nonprofit Website](#)

[Interview with the Founder](#)

**30. WinGate Wilderness Therapy-** Wingate was a wilderness therapy program located in Utah. After facing multiple allegations of abuse, the facility eventually closed in 2023. The program never admitted to these allegations of abuse, yet decided to phase out operations.

[Personal Account of Abuse at Wingate](#)

[Wingate's Closure](#)

[Testimony of Abuse at Wingate](#)

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