

Troubled Girls Were Sent to This Town to Heal. Many Were Lured Into the Sex Trade Instead.

Hawthorne Cedar Knolls Residential Treatment Center in Mount Pleasant, N.Y., is being closed. Some residents were forced into a sex-trafficking ring, federal prosecutors said. Credit: Bryan Anselm for The New York Times



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By Nikita Stewart and Benjamin Weiser

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Tucked inside a neighborhood in a small town just north of New York City, Hawthorne Cedar Knolls was on idyllic, green grounds. It was landscaped to give some peace and stability to the emotionally troubled teenagers who were placed there.

But in recent years, Hawthorne, located in the town of Mount Pleasant, began experiencing unusually high rates of teenagers going missing from its campus. Staff, law enforcement officials and advocates for children said they knew that some of the missing residents had fallen victim to sex traffickers. Many of the girls in the rehabilitation center had been [placed there in the first place to rescue them from the sex trade](#).

On Thursday, the breadth of a pipeline carrying young women out of Hawthorne and into prostitution became clearer. Nineteen people were charged in a sex-trafficking ring that exploited young women and girls as young as 13 years old, federal prosecutors said.

At least 15 victims were in the child welfare system, including nine who were residents of Hawthorne, the prosecutors said.

The defendants named in a series of indictments unsealed this week face charges including sex trafficking of a minor and conspiracy, which carry maximum sentences of up to life in prison.

The indictments do not name the residential center in Westchester County, referring to it only as “Facility-1,” but it is Hawthorne, an official at the center and two other people briefed on the matter said. Some of the defendants are in their 20s; the two oldest are 59, prosecutors said. None of the defendants were staff members of Hawthorne.

The charges were announced by the United States attorney’s office in Manhattan, the F.B.I. and the Police Department.

Some details of the alleged scheme were contained in the unsealed court papers.

One defendant, Hubert Dupigny, 34, recruited a 16-year-old girl from Hawthorne who worked for him as a prostitute until he was arrested in December 2016, prosecutors wrote. At that point, the girl went to work for his brother, Hensley Dupigny, 29, who posted advertisements for her on [Backpage.com](#) and collected most of her earnings, the prosecutors said.

A prosecutor said at a court hearing in August for Hensley Dupigny that the alleged conspiracy was “particularly egregious” because the defendants sought out minors in the social services system, often children with behavioral or emotional problems who had become wards of the state.



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“These were especially vulnerable victims,” the prosecutor, Elinor L. Tarlow, said. “They didn’t have stable residences. They didn’t have family support. They didn’t have guidance.”

She said the accused traffickers capitalized on that vulnerability. “They approached victims as if they had a romantic interest in them,” she said. “They offered them a place to stay and then they pushed them into prostitution.”

As part of the investigation the government spoke to “multiple victims, who provided firsthand accounts,” Ms. Tarlow added.

The Dupigny brothers have each pleaded not guilty. A lawyer for Hubert Dupigny wrote recently to the court, “Mr. Dupigny adamantly denies that he is guilty of any of the charges” or that he ever forced, threatened or coerced anyone to engage in prostitution. Lawyers for the two men either declined to comment on Thursday or could not be reached for comment.

Hawthorne, which had been heavily scrutinized for its failure to keep teenagers from running away, has been closing in phases all year, said Chris Giglio, a spokesman for the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services, which operates the facility. Mr. Giglio added that the nonprofit was cooperating with federal investigators.

Only six children remain and are expected to be moved to a new location by Tuesday, said Monica Mahaffey, a spokeswoman for the state Office of Children and Family Services.

The Jewish Board announced it would close Hawthorne earlier this year, following pressure from state legislators, severe sanctions from the state child welfare office and growing complaints from residents of Mount Pleasant about teenagers wandering the town, particularly as they headed to trains back to New York City.

In 2016, the town began charging the Jewish Board and another nonprofit that runs a nearby residential treatment center \$250 for every call about missing children in an effort to push the nonprofits to beef up security.

In one recent year, about 73 percent of the 188 residents placed at Hawthorne by the city’s child welfare agency were reported missing, a significantly higher rate than at comparable programs. As a residential treatment center for children with emotional and behavioral problems, Hawthorne was not as restrictive as other facilities for children with more severe mental issues.

Though the nonprofit installed new fencing and took steps to foster trust with the teenagers in hope of dissuading them from running away, the momentum to close Hawthorne was too strong. The federal investigation was also well underway.

David Hansell, the commissioner of New York City's Administration for Children's Services, said in a statement that his agency was cooperating with the investigation.

"We have zero tolerance for trafficking, and we have strong programs in place to protect young people from being trafficked and exploited," he said.