

State legislator expresses concern

Escapes from sex offender facility alleged

BY EMILY VIGLIELMO

When the state Department of Health placed the Juvenile Sex Offender facility at the site of the former Waimano Home in 2000, Pearl City residents vehemently objected. Community members were concerned that clients could escape from the facility, which is located near two schools, so the site was secured.

DOH contracted with Benchmark Behavioral Health to manage the operation, and Benchmark officials assured residents that "elopements" or escapes would not be a problem.

According to former Benchmark employee Greg Fernandez, however, several elopements by Benchmark's Pearl City clients have occurred.

Fernandez, who quit his job at Benchmark, now works for the state in a different capacity.

He alleges that one elopement happened on Aug. 13, 2005.

According to Fernandez, a gate to the facility was opened so Benchmark clients could pick fruit while being supervised by staff. But one boy bolted and ran toward homes near Pearl City High.

Fernandez said that he caught up with the client and successfully cajoled him to return to the site. However, the process did take some time, and a police

report had to be filed, said Fernandez.

The filing of the August 2005 police report was verified by Sgt. Arlene Apuna of the Pearl City Police Station.

According to Tina Donkervoet, chief of the DOH Child and Adolescent Mental Health Division, the incident lasted only 20 minutes.

Fernandez also alleges that the same client involved in the Aug. 13 incident escaped while being transported from

Pearl City to Hilo to appear for a court date. The youth reportedly escaped again on Jan. 26 of this year from the Hilo Airport, but was apprehended soon after. Calls to the Hilo Police Department to confirm the incident were not returned.

Donkervoet said that, over the past six years, four elopements have occurred from the Pearl City facility, with three of the four happening when clients were being transported to and from court.

"Benchmark has changed the protocol for transport to court," Donkervoet said. "We do more videoconferencing and we've increased security during trans-

port, either with judiciary department sheriffs or probation officers."

Two other elopements — including one during which a client allegedly was on the run for several weeks in Waianae — were reported by Fernandez. However, these occurrences also could not be confirmed.

"If these charges are accurate,

they are cause for great concern," said Rep. Roy Takumi, who represents parts of Pearl City and is chairman of the House Education Committee.

He said Benchmark officials assured area legislators that any elopements would be reported to the community, "and it doesn't look like that happened."

According to Takumi, "the

program was supposed to be voluntary, and if anyone violated the rules, they were supposed to be sent to Koolau," which is the state Youth Correctional Facility on the Windward side.

"Clearly, Benchmark has not lived up to its commitment to the community," said the state representative.



Rep. Roy Takumi

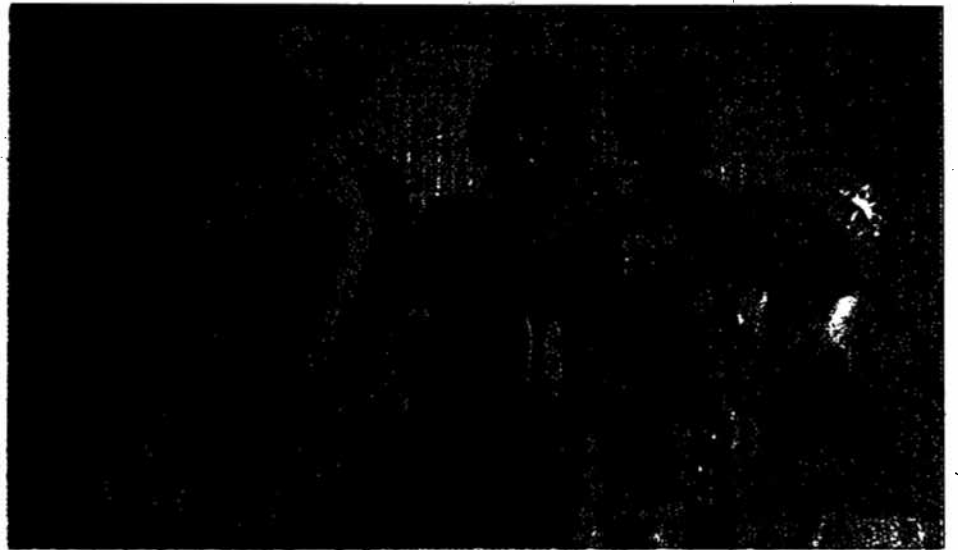


Photo courtesy of Diamond Head Theatre

'Thoroughly Modern' Masuda

Area actress Shawna Masuda (in middle), who stars as Millie Dillmount in the Diamond Head Theatre production of "Thoroughly Modern Mille," said she's "thoroughly thrilled" about the play being extend-

ed. Catch Masuda in her leading role at DHT through Oct. 15. For more information, call 733-0274, or go to the DHT Web site at www.diamondheadtheatre.com.