

Sacramento Bee

May 16, 2008

B2 \*\* Metro section

## Advocacy group honors River Oak youth center

SACRAMENTO - A statewide advocacy organization for children and youths has honored the River Oak Center for Children with the "Exemplary Program of the Year" award.

The award from the California Mental Health Advocates for Children and Youth recognized River Oak's leadership role in providing model programs to help troubled youths.

According to a news release Thursday, River Oak is the only Sacramento-area nonprofit agency that provides five nationally recognized practices that have proved effective in treating emotionally and behaviorally challenged children and youths.

The practices include teaching youths social skills and strengthening families.

- Chelsea Phua

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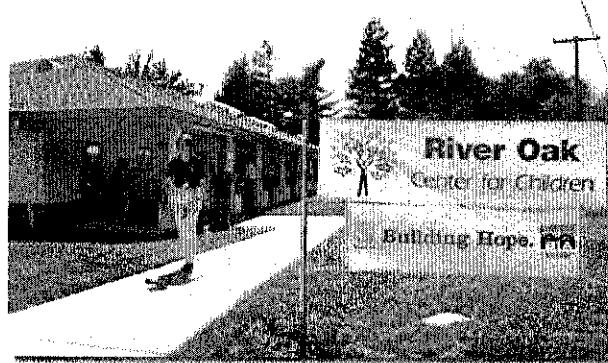
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## Lennar Honored for Mental Health Center for Children



The cottage that Lennar Homes built for the River Oak Center for Children in Roseville, Calif. last year earned the company NAHB community service honors. For more than a decade, Lennar Homes has lent a helping hand to the River Oak Center for Children in Roseville, Calif., a nonprofit organization that provides housing and services to underprivileged children with mental health problems.

Through the years, Lennar has donated to the center and helped built several cottages on the center's residential campus — the latest being the Ron and Darin Mittelstaedt Cottage, a 20-bed facility for children with severe behavioral and emotional disabilities.

In recognition of this project, Lennar received honorable mention in the 2007 Builder Achievement Award for Outstanding Community Service from the National Housing Endowment at the International Builder's Show in Orlando in February.

"We are so grateful for what they've done," said Emilia Godwin, the senior development specialist at River Oak. "This is the way they work. They're so committed to serving the community any way they can."

Planning for the new cottage began in 2005, with construction beginning a year later when the housing market was already into its downswing.

"With the changing market, it did become difficult," said Troy McCollum, a senior construction manager at Lennar who supervised the project and worked with strapped vendors and contractors to donate materials and services.

More than once, he called a supplier to give them a heads up on the supplies they promised for the project. "I'd get a call back and they'd say, 'Hey, things have changed. Business plans have changed. You're going to have to find somebody else,'" said McCollum.

He said California's North State Building Industry Association and HomeAid Sacramento, the philanthropic arm of the HBA, helped Lennar follow up on vendors' commitments.

Lennar had already built a 20-bed home, the Ivey Cottage, for River Oak, so working with the charity, Lennar "tweaked" the plans for the Mittelstaedt Cottage by incorporating sound control elements and changing color schemes, according to McCollum. The cottage was completed in June 2007.

The cottage's current residents are a challenge for the River Oak staff. All of the children have suffered serious physical, psychological or sexual abuse. All come from low-income backgrounds. Many are wards of the court, said Godwin.

"These are the most severely challenged children. They are one step below institutionalization," she said. "They externalize what people have done to them. They can't live with their families. We take them and stabilize them and try to work with their issues."

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The goal of the residential program, she said, is to treat the children so they can eventually be placed in foster homes rather than be institutionalized.

The program has been a proven winner with 70% to 80% of the children able to avoid institutionalization, said Godwin. "It is pretty successful," she said.

Unfortunately, county funding for the program has ended and the county will now place emotionally- and behaviorally-disabled children directly into foster care. Godwin said she is hopeful that the county funding that was once intended for the River Oak program will be given to foster families so they have the resources needed to help the emotionally-challenged children in their care.

"It was a heartbreaking decision, but at the same time it's the reality," said Godwin. "We're not the only nonprofit trying to handle this issue."

River Oak plans to use the Mittelstaedt, Ivey and its other cottages in one of a half-dozen programs now under consideration to replace its residential program — either a boarding school for foster kids with emotional problems, an adolescent drug treatment facility, a Head Start program for young children with emotional problems, a short-term mental health crisis care program or a transition home for teens "aging" out of various mental health programs.

"All of these have very good benefits. It's just deciding what fits best with the mission," she said.

Regardless of what residential program River Oak eventually undertakes, Lennar's McCollum said the company's support of the center has been well worth it.

"We were happy to step up to the plate," McCollum said. "It's our commitment to give back to the community, quite simply. It's a moral obligation."

In honor of its award, Lennar received a \$1,000 donation from the endowment to give to the charity of its choice, the Mustard Seed School in Sacramento.

Seven other builders were honored with 2007 Builder Achievement Awards for Outstanding Community Service during a presentation at the Builders' Show.

The awards were established through a grant to the endowment by Isaac Heimbinder, chairman of Rockville, Md.-based BuildTopia, a provider of Web-based construction management software for home builders, and his wife, Sheila.

For more information about the awards, e-mail Gwyn Donohue at NAHB, or call her at 800-368-5242 x8447.



The ribbon cutting for the new 20-bed cottage included, from the left, Eric Stafford, Republic Electric West HomeAid chair; Mary Hargrave, president and CEO of River Oak Center for Children; John Orr, president and CEO of the North State BIA, Jeff Panastis, division president of Lennar Sacramento; and Sherman Haggerty, program director for Pam Herman HomeAid Sacramento.

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