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Narconon Gets State Mental Health Exemption

By Michael McNutt
Enid Bureau

A controversial drug and alcohol abuse center in north-central Oklahoma achieved a big victory Friday in its two-year battle for state approval.

Less than a year after calling Narconon Chilocco New Life Center's treatment program unsafe and experimental, the Oklahoma Board of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services voted unanimously Friday to exempt the facility from a state requirement to be certified.

The decision came after Narconon showed it had gained approval from a private organization, the Commission for Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities. That allows for an exemption under state law, Patrick Ryan, an attorney representing the board, said.

Ryan said the board's decision was based entirely on the statutory exemption.

"That's different from certifying them," he said. "The board has not ever, and did not by today's action, give a

stamp of approval of Narconon. It simply says because of the statute, we're going to recognize it (the exemption)."

Narconon Chilocco still must be licensed by the state Health Department. The state licensing would be based primarily on whether a facility's buildings, which were the old Chilocco Indian School north of Newkirk, meet fire and safety codes.

The health department could rule the center does not need a state license, Harry Woods, a lawyer for Narconon Chiloc-

co, said.

"I expect that the department of health will recognize that with this exemption from certification, Narconon can lawfully operate in Oklahoma," Woods said. "The form of the action would either be a license, or a decision by them that we don't need a license."

Narconon Chilocco officials said Friday they were confident the center would be licensed, possibly by the end of the month.

See NARCONON, Page 15

OKLAHOMAN &

OKLAHOMA CITY, OK

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Narconon

From Page 1

Gary Smith, Narconon Chilocco president, said he was pleased the center is the closest yet to being allowed to operate at full capacity.

Smith said Narconon Chilocco will go ahead with plans to operate a 75-bed facility but will wait until the state Health Department rules before accepting new patients.

Those patients would pay more than \$20,000 for a three-month program that is based on saunas and vitamins.

Long-range plans call for doubling the center's capacity within the next five years.

"We're going to make sure that we're doing this the way we're supposed to," Smith said.

After being denied certification last year, Narconon Chilocco limited its operation to accepting Indian patients whose bills were paid by contributors. Smith said Friday there were seven patients and 24 employees.

State mental health board members, who voted in December against Narconon Chilocco, agreed Friday with the center's contention that it was eligible for the exemption because it was accredited in June by the private Commission for Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities.

The state attorney general's office, however, argued against the exemption, saying that the board did not

have the authority to exempt a drug and alcohol abuse center based solely on the commission's accreditation.

"The statute says that only a list of certain people can be exempted," assistant attorney general Guy Hurst said. "All others need to be certified."

Hurst said he also does not believe Narconon Chilocco is eligible for licensing by the state Health Department because the center was not certified by the mental health board.

"The way I read the statute is the only way you can get licensed from the health department is to be certified — if you're exempted from certification you can't get licensed," he said.

Lawyers for the state health department were unavailable for comment.

Narconon Chilocco's accreditation expires in June 1993. If it fails to get accredited next year, it likely will have to return to the state mental health board to ask for certification, officials said.

Woods, who guided Narconon Chilocco through several state hearings and lawsuits, said the center plans to drop two lawsuits it filed against the state mental health board.

Meanwhile, the mayor of Newkirk said many residents were disappointed by the state mental health board's action.

Many in the town

said they were opposed to Narconon Chilocco because of its ties with the Church of Scientology. Some said they were threatened after they spoke against it in 1990.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.