

Statement from Steve Harrison, Executive Director of Kurn Hattin Homes – 3/17/21

Good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today. I have some prepared testimony I would like to present before any Questions & Answers, if that is alright.

I am Steve Harrison and I have had the pleasure of serving as Kurn Hattin Homes' Executive Director for 5 and a half years since 2015. In that time, I have seen our staff teach and care for our children as if they were their own, and we take our role in their lives very seriously.

I would like you to know that we appreciate the AOE's decision to conduct a full and fair review, and particularly Chair Carroll's indications that the State Board recognizes "Kurn Hattin's 125 year history of service to youngsters in need, and will undertake this discussion in a manner that is respectful and fact-based, always keeping foremost the best interests of the children." We look forward to continuing to cooperate fully and to addressing any concerns the agency has. We have been transparent in our cooperation with the AOE in its review; however, we understand that it is confidential process, so there may some questions you have that I may not be able to answer as a result. I also am unable to address any questions regarding allegations that involve on-going litigation, as the parties have agreed to participate in a confidential independent investigation of the claims, which is still currently underway. Having said that, I would like to tell you a little bit about Kurn Hattin Homes.

Kurn Hattin Homes operates a residential school located on a 280-acre campus in Westminster, Vermont. For over 125 years, Kurn Hattin has served children ages 5-15, whose families are experiencing a period of need or instability. We provide children a safe, caring, and fun environment where they can excel academically, grow as individuals, and experience the joy of childhood.

Kurn Hattin Homes is a charitable organization with approximately 95% of the school's funding coming from charitable contributions from outside supporters and alumni. Kurn Hattin is on very solid financial footing, and the Homes' families pay little or nothing to have their children attend.

Kurn Hattin Homes operates an Approved Independent elementary and middle school academic program, with only 1 state-tuition-funded student this year. With a remarkably low student to teacher ratio of 6:1, students are provided with individualized support to meet each child's needs in a complete academic program which also includes art, music, and physical education. In addition, there are numerous extra-curricular activities, including band, choir, horseback riding, arts and crafts, and interscholastic and intramural sports. In addition to the academic buildings, the campus includes nine residential cottages, a working farm, therapeutic equestrian center, and athletic facilities.

Children come to Kurn Hattin Homes from Vermont, New Hampshire, and throughout the Northeast. Referrals come from a variety of sources, including many from former children and their families whose lives have been positively transformed by their experience at Kurn Hattin Homes.

I want to provide you some direct, factual information regarding enrollment. Prior to 2018, the Homes typically served approximately 100 children at a time. In 2018, that number was reduced to approximately 80 children at the suggestion of DCF in order to lower the number of children supervised by the house parents in each cottage. Currently, in response to concerns about the pandemic and after further consideration of the best child-to-staff ratio both residentially and academically, Kurn Hattin Homes has further reduced its population to approximately 60 children. Post-pandemic we anticipate a census of around 60 to 70 children (50 to 60 residential and about 10 day students).

Over the past several years, our organization has worked very hard to enhance its academic programs. Kurn Hattin Homes is a recognized PBiS (Positive Behavioral interventions and Support) school at the Tier II level and has been since 2017. Kurn Hattin Homes utilizes PBiS as an umbrella schema for school culture, community, and student conduct. The primary focus of PBiS is creating and maintaining a positive school culture and climate. In 2019, KHH was recognized as a PBiS school of merit for implementation with faithfulness to mission, conduct referral declines, and an improvement in standardized test scores. Kurn Hattin Homes was the only independent school in Vermont to achieve the "Merit School" status with VTPBiS.

In addition to being an Approved Independent School by the Vermont Agency of Education and the only independent school in Vermont to achieve the "Merit School" status with VTPBiS, Kurn Hattin Homes is close to acquiring accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), having already been rated favorably by a Visiting Team in the fall of 2019 prior to the pandemic. This NEASC Accreditation process was put on hold last summer until after the Homes legal situation has been resolved, per their regulations.

Additionally, Kurn Hattin had been licensed by DCF as a residential treatment program. However, we provide housing and education, not treatment. So, on our own initiative, we elected to close our license with DCF because we did not fit in that category. We had begun the process of winding down our license nearly two years ago. It was announcing to DCF our readiness to end the license in September of 2019 that prompted DCF to conduct its final licensing review. DCF supported that transition, and there is ample documentation in the public record to prove it.

Kurn Hattin Homes has also made substantial improvements to the residential program, including the hiring of a new Director of Residential Services in January 2020 who brought more than twenty-five years of experience as a residential professional to the program and who has overseen significant enhancements in all areas of residential life. Additionally, changes in the structure of the counseling and health services departments have occurred to ensure that nurses and counselors are now available during the afternoon and evening hours, which has strengthened the support provided for the children each day. Staff-to-child ratios have been lowered significantly, we have extensive staff training, including weekly staff meetings with on-going training opportunities, and our staff has attended our Annual Conference each October for excellent professional development by top professionals in the field.

I want to close by saying that we have heard from countless former students and families about the incredible positive difference that Kurn Hattin had on their lives, and I encourage any legislator or agency official to come visit Kurn Hattin and spend as much time as you would like (subject to any COVID restrictions) in order to see our operations, our wonderful staff in action, and the quality care that is being provided for our children. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today.