



Teens and guides from Aspira Adventure hike in Garfield County in 2016. The program ended its "wilderness financial position" when it closed last year.

BY LUCY HART

# Criticism, competition cloud

## Therapy

Continued from A1

Today, it's former students keeping a critical spotlight on programs, by sharing their personal experiences in Netflix shows, on TikTok and other social media, and in podcasts and news coverage. Meanwhile, private equity firms and large corporations have withdrawn their financial backing for the industry, and the two trends have affected bottom lines so drastically that some programs opted to shut down.

With four programs closing in the last year, Utah now has its lowest number of wilderness therapy programs in at least a decade.

The state had, on average, about 11 licensed outdoor youth programs during a 10-year period that began in 2013, data from the Department of Health and Human Services shows. Now, there are just five youth wilderness programs here.

Aspira Adventure was the first to announce its recent closure, shutting its program down last April after nearly a decade in the business. In an email that has been circulated online, Aspira's owners wrote that "recessionary and economic factors," paired with competition from 30-day inpatient programs that are covered by insurance and negative press have all contributed to an "untenable financial position for Aspira."

Two months later, in June, Outback Therapeutic announced it was closing. Its owners wrote in an email posted on Reddit that they were opting to shut down after the program's executive director stepped away. His decision, they said, came after difficulties he had navigating the program through a pandemic, combined with "increased restrictive regulations, social climate and ongoing economic stressors."

WinGate Wilderness closed next, in August. And in February of this year, Open Sky Wilderness — which operated in Colorado, but was licensed in Utah because its guides hike with teenagers here in winter months — held its last graduation.

Efforts to reach the owners of these programs were unsuccessful.

The Utah programs still operating have far fewer clients than they are allowed to take, state records indicate. For example, RedCliff Ascent — which has been operating in Utah for more than 30 years — is licensed to take as many as 82 students at one time. Records show it had just eight students during a February 2024 inspection, and only six students were enrolled when licensers visited in September 2023 and in January.

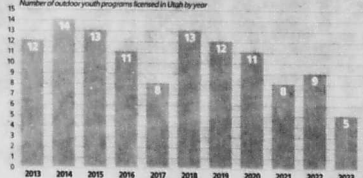
The Salt Lake Tribune attempted to reach owners of Utah programs still operating. Of those contacted, none agreed to speak publicly. Only Devan Glismeyer, co-founder of Second Nature Wilderness Family Therapy in Duchesne, offered a statement, which noted the industry's challenges include the rise of both social media and of shorter-term residential competitors.

"For 25 years Second Nature has provided a safe and supportive clinical approach combining sophisticated therapy and the healing power of nature," he said. "We have worked with over 15,000 families, and are proud of our impeccable safety record."

### Wilderness therapy programs decline

With four programs closing in the last year, Utah now has the lowest number of youth wilderness therapy programs in at least a decade.

Number of outdoor youth programs licensed in Utah by year



Source: Utah Department of Health and Human Services

GRAPHIC BY CHRISTOPHER CHRISTENSEN | The Salt Lake Tribune



Paris Hilton, at right, leads a march in 2020 to Provo Canyon School, a Utah residential treatment center she attended when she was a teen.

RICK EGAN | The Salt Lake Tribune

### SOCIAL MEDIA BACKLASH

After deaths in Utah and elsewhere in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Congress in 2007 commissioned a federal study that focused on 10 young people who were fatally injured during wilderness therapy — including five placed in Utah programs over a 12-year period beginning in 1990. A bill to federally regulate wilderness therapy and teen residential treatment programs was introduced then, but it never passed.

This tension was building just before the 2008 recession — which shuttered some wilderness therapy businesses, according to Will White, a researcher who has studied and published a book about the history of adventure wilderness therapy and hosts the podcast, "Stories from the Field." (He is an advocate for outdoor therapy and founded a program in Maine.)

The industry was hit by private equity firms pulling back investments in wilderness therapy, he said, and some states stopped running government-funded programs. The programs that kept going, he said, adapted — by moving away from both the private equity model and from their former one-size-fits-all approach, better tailoring care to individuals.

The industry survived. But in recent years, intense social pressure has started mounting. And White said he's seeing the number of outdoor therapy programs shrinking more rapidly.

From 2008 through 2011, "it was more of a slow closure," White said. "And this time it's much quicker."

This time, the narrative is being driven by the teenagers who went to these camps and are now adults, many of whom identify themselves as "survivors" of the troubled teen industry.

A quick search on TikTok for "wilderness therapy" shows a stream of young people telling stories about their experiences. A few say they were forced to hike in the desert. One woman described feeling ill and not being able to drink water, and being told she was lying. Several detailed the trauma they say they felt after their parents hired men to forcibly take them from their bedrooms in the middle of the night to transport them to the programs.

The negative attention the wilderness therapy industry has received has been "hard for programs to combat," according to the Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Council. Its members are wilderness therapy programs throughout the country; it was formed in 1996, partly in response to allegations of abuse and the deaths that were occurring at that time. The council says it has worked since then to implement best practices and standards for its member programs.

"The social media and news media climate around treatment programs has been one of the biggest challenges over the last several years," the organization said in response to emailed questions, "and unfortunately, only one side of the story is being told so publicly."

When families try to share their positive experiences, they're often attacked online, the OBHC Council said, and media reports have often not been objective or balanced. The council said that people who have had a negative experience "need to be heard," and added that it believes "their stories deserve to be told and at times change is needed and welcomed."

But the council also noted that many of the stories recently shared in the media happened more than two decades ago — and that some of the questionable practices highlighted in those reports are what led to the formation of the OBHC Council.

"The portrayal of programs today is not representative of what is actually happening in OBHC programs today," the group said. "There are unlicensed programs out there and there are programs that need to be closed if they do not adjust their practices and we support that they are being challenged."

In advising parents, Glismeyer said, "We encourage the media and any prospective families to seek out and speak to current or former families that are more than willing to share their life-changing and at times life-saving experiences."

### EMPOWERED TO SPEAK OUT

There's been a societal shift in recent years focusing on the need for programs to be transparent and to hold their accounts, said Meg Applegate, CEO of Unlicensed, an advocacy group of former residents of teen treatment facilities. Many people who went to these programs have felt empowered to speak out in the wake of Paris Hilton's 2020 documentary, Applegate said, in which Hilton said she was abused at Utah's Provo Canyon

## Utah's wild, arid landscape backdrop for therapy

By JESSICA MILLER

Utah was the place where wilderness therapy got its start in the western United States, then spread for years as it became a multimillion-dollar industry. Programs took struggling teens from across the country and hiked them through Utah's hot deserts, with the promise to parents that their approach would fix a child's behavioral issues, substance use problems or other mental health struggles.

But some teenagers have died in these wilderness camps, and many programs have been plagued by allegations of cruel punishment and abusive tactics. In recent years, negative accounts on social media and critical coverage in news media have affected bottom lines drastically.

Last year, nearly half of Utah's wilderness camps closed. And the five programs that remain open appear to be enrolling far fewer young people than they are licensed to accept.

Here's how wilderness camps rose up in Utah and helped spark the "troubled teen" industry — and the controversies that followed.

### THE START: LARRY DEAN OLSEN

A Brigham Young University student from Idaho named Larry Dean Olsen is often cited as the founder of wilderness therapy camps in the United States. In the 1960s, he started ending outings with his classmates, teaching them how to build fires and shelters and other techniques they would need to endure being in the wilderness without modern camping equipment.

He soon began overseeing trips that were several days long. Deans



Larry Dean Olsen and Olsen, left, and Ezekiel Sanchez are shown in the late 1960s. The two founded the wilderness program Anasazi Foundation.

### School.

"What that did to survivors is that it let all of us know ... that we can be heard, and that people care, and that we matter," Applegate said. And the digital age, she said, has "really created more opportunities for us to not only be heard, but also just so many different ways that we could. So we've got TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, we've got the TTI [Troubled Teen Industry] Roadkit. So many different avenues for us to be able to get our stories out there."

And as more young people share these painful memories, Applegate said, they're connecting with a general public that has a better understanding of mental health and treatment than in years past.

"I think that, coupled with the sheer amount of stories and experiences that have flooded social media ... [has] really confronted this industry in a way that they really have nowhere to go."

Some of those who have been in Utah programs more recently aren't just sharing their personal accounts on social media — they're taking their wilderness therapy program to court. In civil lawsuits filed in the last year, three young people have leveled familiar

accusations of abuse allegations during its history in the 1960s. Wingle Wilderness, who alleged he was sexually abused, filed a lawsuit in 2023. Another lawsuit, filed in 2023, alleged that a teen was sexually abused at a wilderness therapy program. A third lawsuit, filed in 2023, alleged that a teen was sexually abused at a wilderness therapy program.

Two programs last month, Open Sky Guides filed a lawsuit to drink unlicensed access to hypoxia, her sleeping bag, and logs in order to not file a lawsuit there were no other in court record. Another lawsuit, filed in 2023, alleged that a teen was sexually abused at a wilderness therapy program.

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