



# Residential Treatment Programs for Children: Things for Parents to Consider

## **What is a residential program?**

A residential treatment program is a 24-hour-a-day, year-round program with specific services to meet the needs of the child. All of these residential treatment programs are licensed for the services they provide and are under the clinical supervision of a licensed mental health professional.

## **Where are residential treatment programs located and what services are offered?**

Residential treatment centers (RTC) are located in the community and offer various on-site treatment services such as evaluations, individual and family therapies, medication management, specialized diets, or skills groups. While in the program, educational programming can be provided at a local school or an on-site school.

## **How long may a child be in this placement?**

Lengths of stay for residential treatment programs can vary from a few weeks to a few months, and for some children, may be longer.

## **Why might a residential treatment program be needed?**

Because residential treatment programs are 24-hour-a-day programs located away from the child's home and school, it is not usually the first treatment option considered unless a child is experiencing very serious mental health [or chemical health] concerns that cannot be supported from home. When your child's mental health, and emotional or behavioral problems become so severe that your family is unable to keep him or her at home, your child may be placed in a hospital or residential treatment program.

Residential treatment programs may be considered for a variety of reasons, including assessment and diagnosis, crisis intervention, psychiatric treatment, substance use, abuse prevention, or education.

When making a decision about a residential treatment program, it is important to consider the following information about your child:

- Evaluation data
- Current symptoms and behaviors of concern
- Previous treatments and interventions
- Reasons why other less restrictive program options such as intensive outpatient, intensive in-home therapies, day treatment, or hospitalization are being ruled out

You should partner with your child and mental health providers to identify goals for residential treatment programs. Admission to these programs must be determined medically necessary by a mental health professional and agreed on by both the residential treatment provider and the funding source that is covering the cost of the service.

While a child or youth is in a residential treatment program, home visits are determined in collaboration with the child, family, and treatment providers, and in some cases may require pre-approval by the health plan funding residential treatment.

---

## **How are children placed in a residential treatment program?**

**Voluntary Placement:** You, as parents, may choose to place your child in a residential treatment setting because it has been recommended by a therapist, county social worker, or other professional, or because you have done your own research.

Because residential treatment services can be very expensive, it is important to think about how it will be paid for. Talk with your insurance company to see what is covered under your plan, if there is a limit to coverage, and how to start the process. Minnesota requires health plans to cover medically necessary services, so working with your child's mental health providers to document medical need is the first step.

When you decide to pursue a residential treatment program, a mental health clinician must make a formal recommendation to your health plan's Utilization Review (UR) team and/or county human services out-of-home placement screening team, depending on which entity funds your child's health care. Health plans have requirements of their own when authorizing a residential treatment program, and some plans will require a county out-of-home placement screening. In these cases, authorization for a residential treatment program often occurs by phone between the recommending clinician and the health plan UR team.

If your health care plan does not cover residential treatment settings and you cannot afford to pay for it, you will need to call your county mental health services division to see how to qualify for publicly funded programs or county payment for treatment. If your child is already covered under Medical Assistance, the county will be involved in the decision regarding a residential treatment program.

It is important to know that you do not have to give up custody of your child or make him or her a ward of the state so that the county can pay for the program. Minnesota Statute 260D clearly states that a determination for mental health services and treatment through a residential program is based on medical necessity, which means your child's need for treatment. Even though there are no federal requirements that parents give up custody, some counties may try to insist that parents give up their rights in order to receive a county-funded residential placement. You need to use extreme caution in these circumstances and should seek the assistance of a PACER advocate or an attorney before giving up your parental rights.

If your child requires an out-of-home placement screening to approve a residential treatment program, your child's county case manager will be responsible for gathering necessary documentation and writing a summary of the recommendation for residential treatment. At the screening, the case manager will typically present the information to a team of providers who will review the medical necessity criteria and decide if funds for a residential treatment program will be approved. You have the right to attend the screening. When you attend, share information about your child's goals, challenges, and how you believe a residential treatment program will help. Some health plans are invited to participate in these screenings by phone.

**Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team Placement:** IEP teams, which include parents, may determine that in order for your child to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE), placement is needed in a residential treatment setting. This means that the IEP team has determined that your son or daughter needs a therapeutic setting such as residential treatment in order to receive educational benefit from their IEP services. This kind of placement requires the school to pay for the treatment program, and they are legally required to pursue insurance coverage to fund treatment, room, and board. The school district is ALWAYS required to pay for the cost of educating the child.

**Court-ordered Placement:** In some situations, a court may order a child into a residential treatment program to ensure the child's safety or to access treatment. If your child is court-ordered into a residential treatment program, you retain custody of your child unless there are child protection issues. If the court determines the state should have legal custody of your child under a CHIPS (child in need of protection or services) petition, they will hold a disposition hearing to determine whether or not the child is in need of protective services and will issue orders on what needs to be done. Parents in this situation should call a PACER advocate for more information on custody.

---

## **Making the Decision**

---

Deciding to place your child in a residential treatment program is difficult. Some parents in this situation feel as though they have failed their child. Remember that this is about choosing an option for a more structured setting that may help your child be more successful. There are also many other issues that need to be considered when making this decision, including impact to family structure, accessibility to treatment, and safety. By making this decision with support and input from family, friends, and mental health professionals who know your child best, you will know you have done what you can to help your child.

Call PACER at 952-838-9000 or 800-537-2237 (toll free in Greater Minnesota) or online to [PACER.org](https://www.pacer.org) for more information.

See PACER's Companion handout, *Parent Checklist for Residential Treatment Programs*:  
[PACER.org/parent/php/PHP-c85b.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c85b.pdf)