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Drug unit is linked to church

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LANSING — The Michigan Department of Corrections paid more than \$100,000 during the last three years to a drug treatment program with veiled ties to the controversial Church of Scientology.

Leaders of the drug program, known as Narconon, admit it is based on Scientology teachings, but they deny any affiliation with the church. A state corrections official said he was satisfied that Scientology does not run Narconon.

Church records obtained by The Detroit News showed, however, that Scientology leaders created Narconon and ran it to recruit former addicts into the church.

THE RECORDS revealed that not only is Narconon affiliated with the California-based church, but that the program also was run by the church's Guardian Office, a division that has been linked by federal authorities to burglaries of U.S. government offices and other undercover operations.

Nine Scientology leaders, all assigned to the Guardian Office, were convicted late last year in Washington on federal charges arising from the theft of documents from government buildings.

Although Michigan continues to use Narconon, California and Delaware stopped financing Narconon programs several years ago after concluding they were affiliated with the Church of Scientology.

Officials in those states expressed concern that the agreements violated constitutionally ordered provisions requiring separation of church and state.

ON LEARNING of the Scientology-Narconon connection from News reporters, Michigan State Rep. Jeffrey Padden, chairman of the House Corrections Committee, said his panel would investigate. "It is clearly something that has to be resolved," he said.

Besides the concerns over the federal convictions of Guardian leaders and the potential for violations of church-state separation requirements, the effectiveness of the Narconon program is being questioned. Narconon boasts of a cure rate of 50 percent to 90 percent but offers no evidence to support it. A 1974 California study said the figures were exaggerated.

Despite Michigan Narconon Director Kenneth Drogorub's denials of a connection between the drug program and the church, The News found:

- Nearly everyone connected with Narconon — including Drogorub — is a member of the Church of Scientology.
- The textbooks and classroom materials used in the prison drug program are copyrighted by L. Ron Hubbard, a former science fiction writer and founder of the Church of Scientology.

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Drug program linked to church

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● Narconon courses taught in the prisons are virtually identical to those offered by the Church of Scientology. They even have the same titles, such as the "communications course," the "study course" and the "objectives course."

● A disaffected church official described Scientology and Narconon as "one and the same."

● Records seized by the FBI in raids on Scientology offices in Los Angeles showed that Narconon is affiliated with the church.

The News obtained a 1972 internal church letter in which Hubbard praised Narconon and declared: "The incomparable Guardian's Office has been running the Narconon . . . program over the world."

Under a \$35,000-a-year contract with the state, Narconon offers drug therapy to inmates in Michigan's three Ionia prisons: the Michigan Reformatory, Michigan Training Unit and Riverside Correctional Facility.

Narconon also claims to have branches in Sweden, Germany, Australia, Mexico and Canada and outpatient treatment centers for street addicts in other parts of this country.

UNLIKE OTHER drug programs, Narconon does not stress the dangers of drug use. Instead, it employs Scientology's methods intended to instill inmates with a sense of self-confidence.

Drogorub offered this example of a typical Narconon session: The inmates pair off in twos and face one another. One says to the other, "It's raining outside," even though the sun is shining. The inmate repeats the phrase over and over until he sounds so self-assured he begins to believe it really is raining.

Narconon offers five sequential courses in the Ionia prisons, each lasting from a month to six weeks. The classes meet for 2½ hours a day, five days a week.

Typically, the inmates pair off in twos around the classroom and work at mastering communication skills based on what they have learned in class lectures and in their independent studies of Narconon literature.

WHILE INSTRUCTORS move about the room monitoring the activity, the inmates are expected to speak clearly to one another, define their terms and maintain eye contact. Drogorub said the purpose is to "create a higher awareness, a more responsible attitude" that he believes will help the inmates achieve the self-confidence necessary to master their drug problems.

Narconon is the only private drug treatment agency working under contract with the Corrections Department. The department offers its own drug education and group counseling sessions in most of the state's eight other prisons.

Drogorub, who has directed the Michigan program for the last two years, said about 700 inmates have taken the course at Ionia, with 60 now enrolled.

A contrasting view of Narconon was offered by LaVenda VanSchaick, 29, of Boston, a Scientologist for nine years who worked with the drug program before leaving last year. In December, she filed a \$200 million class action lawsuit accusing the church of cheating thousands of converts out of their money through "mind control."

SHE SAID that typically a portion of the money obtained by Narconon from government agencies is kicked back to the Narconon headquarters in Los Angeles and ultimately to the church.

While the Narconon therapy is free to the inmates, the Church of Scientology is supported by money its members are expected to pay for courses that range from \$25 for beginners to upwards of \$2,000 for the more advanced classes.

Each course in the series is intended to free the mind of "engrams," the mental quirks that Scientologists believe cause mental illness. Eventually, a church member who has been through several courses can attain a state of "clear," a kind of superhuman awareness where the mind has been relieved of all neurosis, according to church doctrine.

By then, the follower may have paid the church as much as \$15,000, Mrs. VanSchaick said.

THE FACT that converts are required to pay for the courses has prompted government investigators to brand the religion a money-making scheme and the Internal Revenue Service has refused to grant the church a blanket tax exemption. Nevertheless, some branches have been granted exemptions. A Michigan Treasury Department spokesman said the church is not required to pay state taxes.

Drogorub, a 28-year-old Detroit native who joined Narconon and Scientology in 1972 while living in Los Angeles, denied the drug program is used to lure former addicts into the church.

"All the materials we use come from L. Ron Hubbard's research," he said, "but as far as any connection (with the church), there is none."

"I think originally when the program was started we were heavily backed by the Church of Scientology. We got a lot of support and still do in the way of consultation on technical matters."

BUT DROGORUB, who heads a staff of three full-time instructors — all paid by Narconon out of the state grant — and five inmate assistants, said that Scientology is not taught in the prison courses and "not one" Michigan prisoner has ended up joining the church.

"They (inmates) have joined the church in other states," he said, "but it hasn't happened here."

His assertions are impossible to check because Corrections Director Perry Johnson, citing privacy statutes, refused to release a list of inmates who have participated in the program.

Narconon pamphlets say the program was founded in 1966 by an Arizona prison inmate and drug user named William Benitez after he read Hubbard's works. The Michigan branch opened in 1976, offering the Corrections Department a free three-month pilot program.

"YOU DON'T look a gift horse in the mouth," said Robert Berles, the correction department's treatment director, "so we took it."

With no evaluation of the program's success, the department awarded Narconon a \$19,583 contract in March, 1977. That was followed by a \$31,167 contract in 1978, a \$35,000 contract in 1979 and another \$35,000 contract last October.

The department had planned to eliminate the Narconon program last year to comply with budget cuts ordered by Gov. William G. Milliken. But the contract was renewed after officials received more than 100 similarly worded letters from inmates urging that the program be retained.

Berles said his agency is planning to evaluate the success of the program at Ionia, adding that Narconon might be expanded to other prisons.

Church of Scientology worldwide membership is estimated by some outside observers at a few hundred thousand, although Scientology leaders claim to have as many as 5 million followers.

Scientology recently opened a downtown Detroit office in a building at Lafayette and Griswold that recently housed the Burton Abstract & Title Co. The purchase price was \$650,000.

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