



**SHOWING SUPPORT:** The Ontario Public Service Employees Union protested the closing of Renaissance Homes of Windsor Friday. Employee Dwayne Hamilton led the group of pickets during the one-hour protest.

Star photo: Scott Webster

# Troubled girls affected by group home closure

## Protesters outraged teens to be sent to London facility

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It's being called a sad day for youth justice in Windsor — a time when girls as young as 12 years old could soon be sent to London after being arrested.

The girls, who are either awaiting a court date in custody or have been sentenced to detention at the facility, would be separated from their families, social workers and lawyers.

"If these kids are in trouble with the law they have multiple problems. They need care because they are very vulnerable," said Michael O'Hearn, a defence lawyer who works with youth. "It's much harder to help them when they are out of the community."

Renaissance Homes Windsor, the only co-ed detention home in the area, is slated to close Sept. 30 when its contract with the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services ends.

A handful of the group home's employees staged a protest outside the facility at 830 Ouellette Ave. Friday. The workers hoisted signs that accused the

provincial government of placing higher emphasis on saving a few bucks than rehabilitating the troubled teens.

"It's going to be very difficult for the professionals to work with those kids and try to prevent re-offending when their clients are 2½ hours away in the London area and beyond," said Gino Franche, of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union.

The ministry of children and youth services confirmed that while teen boys will likely be treated at another Windsor facility, there are no similar programs for girls in the area.

"It is our commitment to keep kids close to home whenever possible," wrote spokesperson Erika Botond in an e-mail to The Star. "Given the low numbers of females in custody, in order to provide this programming, the female youth sentenced to a custody sentence in Windsor will serve their sentence in London in a gender-specific program."

Lawyers specializing in youth crime reported that since the Youth Criminal Justice Act passed in 2003, the number

of youth sentenced to time in open-custody facilities has dropped.

There are 10 beds available at Renaissance Homes, and another 11 beds at a second open-custody facility in Windsor. Ministry officials said four of the 21 spaces were occupied Friday.

Despite the decrease, O'Hearn was adamant that youth should stay in their hometown as the philosophy behind the act is to rehabilitate and reintegrate young offenders in their communities.

"It shouldn't be a numbers game. These are human beings, and we are supposed to place value on helping the vulnerable," he said.

A separate program which treated mentally disturbed youths who had committed violent crimes closed last fall. The Good Shepherd program, which was run by Maryvale Adolescent and Family Services for 20 years, treated teens between 12 and 15 years old who were remanded to a secure facility by court order.

The youth were transferred to other secure-custody facilities when the program closed in November.