

# Foreign exchange program controversy

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## Eyewitness News Exclusive



Eyewitness News

(New York - WABC, November 20, 2007) -- The U.S. State Department is investigating whether a major non-profit foreign exchange agency violated regulations by not having proper homes in place for visiting students.

Local families who thought they'd have kids for a few weeks say they got stuck with students who had nowhere to go.

The Investigator Sarah Wallace has more on this exclusive story. State Department regulations are clear -- before a foreign exchange student comes to in the United States the sponsoring agency is supposed to have secured a home placement and a school placement for the year.

Well now there are allegations that an agency called ASSE International has blatantly violated those regulations. ASSE denies it.

"I just think it's wrong. It's wrong all around " said Michele Renaud.

Michele Renaud thought it would be a great experience for her son TJ to have foreign visitors. So this summer, she welcomed Hee-Sung from Korea, to stay while he attended an English language camp in Putnam County. She also took in Lenny from France -- both students would then go to a different, permanent home for the school year.

Sarah Wallace: "Your understanding was you'd have them for how long?"

Michele: "Four weeks."

The sponsoring agency -- ASSE International -- is headquartered in California, with area representatives in several states, including New York.

"They did not have placement for either one of my boys ... And could I keep them for a few more days. ... And it was going on the third month," Michele said.

Ira Drescher and his family, who also live in Putnam County, took in three exchange students -- two from Japan, and one from France.

"We found out none of them had placement. I mean we were told they all had placement and they'd be here for a month," Ira said.

The Dreschers say they scrambled to get the students enrolled in the local school because ASSE had done nothing. Federal regulations require that a school placement is secured before students arrive.

Michele Renaud echoes the Dreschers.

"We went to the school. They were not even registered. The school didn't even have their names," she said.

"Those students, before they departed their home country, were supposed to be promised a properly screened and secured host family, as well as a high school," Danelle Grijalva said.

Danelle Grijalva says her Internet based watchdog group has received complaints about ASSE from families in nine different states.

Independently, we received several e-mails and phone calls. One area representative writes: "This has been a bait and switch program from the beginning."

"To get them here and have them fend for themselves and just hope that the temporary families fall in love with them is a recipe for disaster," Danelle said.

In Buffalo, New York we heard a disturbing case of a young girl from Thailand happily living in a temporary house, then placed by ASSE with a family living in a mobile home on the side of the road in the Adirondacks.

"She was distraught. She was crying," Barbara said.

Barbara Costuros says she drove four hours each way to bring 18-year-old Sufrete back to Buffalo.

"It was dirty ... I see mice ... yes I was scared" Sufrete said.

Sufrete says she was told by ASSE she'd be sent back to Thailand if she didn't stay in the Adirondacks. But her parents, who paid more than \$10,000 to the agency, had had enough. She flew home.

ASSE declined to be interviewed but released this statement: "ASSE is has always been committed to full compliance with all U.S. Department of State regulatory requirements governing its programs."

When we visited the Dreschers several weeks ago, they decided to keep their French student for the year. But with two children of their own, the family just could not keep the other students.

"They start school, they get upset. It's very disturbing to them. ... All of them is too much," Ira said.

Michele Renaud still had one of her foreign students waiting for a permanent placement,as well.

"It just feels that we were lied to ... blatantly lied to," Michele said.

The students from Putnam County have all now been placed in permanent homes, although a couple of them say they found families on their own without ASSE's help. The Agency claims as of a few weeks ago, all its students had been placed.

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