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Trust worker willing to return to face sex-abuse charges

by Sarona Iosefa

A Hebron Trust staff member facing allegations of sexual abuse made by youths in the trust's care is willing to return to Christchurch to face charges.

The trust announced this yesterday in response to an article in "The Press" in which three trust staff, who wished to remain anonymous, expressed concerns about the handling of the allegations made a year ago. The workers said they felt "uneasy" about the way the former staff member was allowed back into his job after an allegation that was later withdrawn.

Staff members were told about the allegations about two weeks ago. They were then told not to discuss the matter among themselves, with the young people in their care, or outside work, the workers said.

The worker about whom the allegations were made had since been moved by the Order of St John of God, which set up the trust for street kids, to Australia and later the United States for specialist treatment after a second sexual abuse allegation.

The Australasian provincial for the Order of St John of God, Brother Joseph Smith, travelled from Australia at the weekend to attend a news conference yesterday concerning the allegations.

He said he would remain in Christchurch for about two days to help resolve the situation. The worker at the centre of the allegations had indicated he was

willing to return to New Zealand to face charges if necessary, said Brother Joseph. He was no longer working with young people, and was upset at the recent media attention.

The order was not hiding anything when it arranged for the worker to go overseas, he said. The agency's prime concern was the young people in its care, and the worker's health.

The worker had since received some "emotional treatment" at a centre in New Mexico that specialised in treating drug, alcohol, sexual abuse, and emotional problems, Brother Joseph said.

The trust confirmed in a news conference that up to four allegations had been made against the staff member by young people in its care, although no charges were laid. The trust had conducted its own investigations, and been in touch with appropriate agencies.

Brother Joseph said many of the 16 staff were upset at the media attention and its potential to damage relations between staff and young people. The director of the trust, Ms Cathy Harrison, said yesterday that staff meetings were being held to try to resolve matters.

A spokesman for the Sydenham Police, Sergeant Lewis Corbett, said yesterday that the police were still investigating complaints about a former trust staff member, but the case had become of reduced priority during the year because the alleged offender had left the country.

"We are, however, still reviewing the file," Mr Corbett said.

