
Drug center accused of holding five

By Kathryn Stroeve
and Elle Sussman

Journal-Constitution Staff Writers

The American Civil Liberties Union has gone to court to force the release of five teenagers who it says are being held against their wills by a drug-rehabilitation center in Marietta.

The actions were filed in Cobb County Superior Court late last week by attorney Kathleen Wilde, who said the teenagers are being held by an unlicensed organization in violation of state law.

The court papers say that the teenagers' continued detention at the STRAIGHT Inc. center creates "an immediate danger to physical and mental health" and that they have suffered inhumane and undignified treatment there.

Ms. Wilde, who was unable to gain admittance to the center Thursday, said she filed the actions because "I've had very disturbing reports from people released from STRAIGHT as recently as last Friday."

The teenagers are not permitted to use the phone or communicate with anyone outside the center, she said.

Ms. Wilde filed writs of habeas corpus — "orders to produce the bodies" — on behalf of Travis [redacted], of Dunwoody, 18; Bill [redacted], no address given, 18; Allen [redacted] and Kathy [redacted], both of Marietta and both 17, and Janice [redacted] of Spartanburg, S.C., also 17.

A court hearing on the writs, which demand that the teenagers be produced Thursday, has been set for that date.

But Travis [redacted] father, James [redacted] said he was not told of the ACLU's action on behalf of his son.

The ACLU "is sticking their nose in my business and in my son's business," he said.

He defended STRAIGHT, saying it's the "best program there is."

"My son thinks so, too," [redacted] said. "He's 18 years old, and he can leave anytime he wants, but hasn't left."

A boy who was released from STRAIGHT recently said that he called the ACLU and gave attorneys the names of the five teenagers listed on the writs.

Parents of the other four teens could not be reached for comment.

STRAIGHT director Dave Tilley said he received copies of the writs late Friday.

"I will be reviewing those with our attorney," he said Saturday.

Tilley said his organization is seeking a state license.

He said the state Department of Human Resources has been in contact with STRAIGHT, in keeping with its normal licensing procedures.

"We are going to come under the auspices of DHR," Tilley said. "That is our intention and our desire."

The organization's strict methods have been described by some observers and par-

Teens

FROM 1B

Participants as "brainwashing."

A 17-year-old Sandy Springs youth, recently released from STRAIGHT, called the program "child abuse" and a "hell-hole."

"The worst part is in the beginning," he said. "You sit in a chair for 12 hours and are allowed to go to the bathroom only twice — even if you wet your pants."

According to participants in the program, teenagers are often lured into enrollment by the STRAIGHT staff or by their parents, who may promise that they can leave the program if they don't like it.

For instance, they said, one girl was taken into the program on the pretext of using STRAIGHT's WATS line to make a long-distance call. Once she was inside the building, she was persuaded by staff members to stay.

When children are enrolled in the first phase of the five-part program, they are placed in a "foster home" and forbidden contact with their families and with anyone not in STRAIGHT.

The foster homes are provided by parents of other, more advanced children in the program. These parents' children have already won back the privilege to live at home and are then charged with supervising the newcomer.

The "newcomer" phase can be as short as 14 days, or it could go on for months, depending on how the child responds, Tilley has said.

During the first phases, members are pulled out of school and subjected to long days of intense "rap sessions" in the group's brightly lit, windowless building.

They "earn" the right to "see their families and return to school only" at the discretion of the STRAIGHT staff.

Tilley, a former principal of a Cobb middle school, says STRAIGHT's methods are completely defensible.

"For many people this is an absolute last-resort place," he said. "When you come here you've already admitted you can't handle your kids."

But others say STRAIGHT goes too far.

Robert Halford, director of the Metropolitan Atlanta Council on Alcohol and Drugs, said his organization refuses to endorse STRAIGHT.

"The program uses the same methods that many cults use," he said. "The results can be pretty extreme."

Disgruntled past members tell of locks on the outside of doors and windows at foster homes, and of physical abuse that, they say, takes place in the center's "time-out" rooms.

"One parent with a child now in the program said Friday that groups of young staffers restrain uncooperative male members by sitting or jumping on them until they agree to

believe."

"This never happens in the presence of the executive staff, so they can plead innocence," said the parent, who asked not to be identified. "But they know it goes on."

"Part of the program is to get the children tired," the parent said, adding that, at one meeting, his son collapsed from lack of sleep. The child is still in the program.

Tilley dismissed the allegations of physical abuse.

"That does not happen," he said. "We do not physically abuse kids. Period. That's upsetting to me."

"I'm concerned" about that kind of accusation against the program, because it's just not true."

He said STRAIGHT has the "most open-door policy of any drug-rehabilitation program."

STRAIGHT is a private, non-profit organization based in St. Petersburg, Fla.