

Former Straight patients speaking out on both sides

By Don Plummer

Marion Daily Journal Staff Writer

Depending on who's talking, the drastic treatment regimen used at a local drug rehabilitation center for adolescents further complicates recovery for some clients or is a last resort that saves lives.

The center at 2221 Austell Road in Smyrna — part of the controversial Straight Inc program — offers a bare-bones approach, a less expensive alternative to hospitalization.

Straight treatment costs about \$13,825 for three months, compared with up to \$30,000 a month for hospitalization.

But cost isn't the only standard to judge the program by. Staff members, many of whom are former patients, have been accused of retaliating against clients for voicing concerns about the program. The lack of adequate professional staff, medical care and physical abuse of patients have been cited by state investigators, but changes have been left up to the 9-year-old center.

"In the beginning, our experience at Straight was very negative because our son was not responding to treatment," said Linda Markham of Marietta. Her 17-year-old, thrown out of a

Straight center in Massachusetts, was given "a last chance" at the Smyrna center.

Mrs. Markham said she, her husband, Don, and their son moved to Cobb to be part of their son's treatment program. "I know it sounds crazy to do it just like that, but we just wanted our child to live instead of killing himself," Mrs. Markham said.

For many parents who enroll their children in the spartan Austell Road center it is often a last resort after they have spent years and hundreds of thousands of dollars on hospitals and therapists.

The investment worked for the Markhams. Their son spent 18 months in intensive treatment at Straight. Now, a year later, he is now a 4.0 student at a local college.

Mrs. Markham said that she and her husband have housed other children who were new to the program and that several former Straight clients continue to live in the Markham home. "I guess we just got use to having kids from the program in our home," she said.

Mrs. Markham said that Straight changes families for the better, but not without pain. Part of the therapy is family involvement.

"At first I didn't know how to take criticism without getting

Few who have experienced the intense program offered by Straight during the nine years it has operated on Austell Road are neutral in the debate over its effectiveness. The program, billed as an adolescent drug rehabilitation and family treatment center, seems to invite controversy.

defensive but after much therapy, I'm better able to deal with growth," Mrs. Markham said. "It's enhanced our marriage also."

The Markhams' experience is not universal among families who turned to Straight for help.

Another mother, who asked not to be identified, said she also housed Straight patients in her home and once took a sick child to the doctor after staff at the Smyrna center refused to seek treatment. The woman said her two sons were tossed out of the program after she complained about the lack of medical treatment at the center. She also said that staff members instructed patients to physically restrain other patients.

"We were discharged from treatment because I had too big of a mouth," the woman said. "They are so ready to discharge you if

you voice any concerns."

While acknowledging that Straight does help some overcome drug use, the woman said she is concerned that inadequately trained staff members often condone behavior she considers to be abusive. She said that, in addition to painfully restraining patients, staff members require clients to sit in folding chairs for up to 16 hours a day with only short breaks. They are given two 6-ounce cups of water a day and 3-second sips of water after exercises, she said.

"I'm concerned about what they don't consider to be abuse," she said. "I'm concerned about the kids (at Straight). They and their parents are really afraid to speak up."

Few who have experienced the intense program offered by Straight during the nine years it has operated on Austell Road are

neutral in the debate over its effectiveness. The program, billed as an adolescent drug rehabilitation and family treatment center, seems to invite controversy.

Founded in St. Petersburg, Fla. in 1976, Straight has spent most of its 15 years embroiled in controversy. Earlier this year, two of its centers in Texas and Virginia were closed after state officials notified officials that their operating licenses were being revoked.

Numerous complaints have been filed against the Smyrna operation, but state officials say Georgia laws, which are not as strict as those in some other states, allow them only to take minor action.

Each of Straight's centers in Georgia, Florida, Maryland, California and Michigan have at one time or another been targets of lawsuits, state investigations or complaints from former clients. Through the years, clients have charged that they were imprisoned, beaten, stripped, abused, starved and held down for hours as part of the program's drug therapy, according to published reports and government documents from each state.

Nationally, Straight officials say their treatment centers are suc-

cessful with 70 percent of their clients. They report treating more than 50,000 people over 15 years. However, mental-health professionals discount those claims.

Disgruntled clients say Straight centers deliberately inflate their success rates by not including patients discharged for not complying with treatment routines they say are cruel. Some clients report that mental and physical abuse are common treatment methods at the local Straight center.

Officials at the local center and its national headquarters contend their programs have done nothing wrong, but acknowledge they have modified the treatment program after complaints and lawsuits.

The Straight program consists of strict discipline that staff and some parents say is needed by adolescents in treatment. Part of that discipline is a rigid caste system that dictates client behavior 24 hours a day.

Cobb Juvenile Court officials resumed referring clients to Straight last summer, after treatment center director Suzanne Hardman called on them to assure administrators that problems

See STRAIGHT, Page 28

Straight

Continued from Page 1B

cited by the state had been corrected.

Juvenile Court Administrator Michelle Marchant-Wellman said several probation officers visited Straight and have referred clients to the program. Probation officer Greg White said one boy he referred spent nine months at the center, but began using drugs heavily after leaving the program.

White said that, when he visited the Straight program, he found it to be "a little odd."

"The biggest surprise was that there was someone with each patient when they went to the bathroom," White said. "It seems a little Medieval."

Mike Anderson, another Cobb probation officer, also sent one youngster to Straight. After 14 months in the program, the boy "has done surprisingly well," Anderson said.

The local Straight center treats patients from several states. As part of the treatment agreement, out-of-state families agree to attend meetings at the local center and to live with other patient families when in town.

Greg Peterson, an official with the state Department of Human Resources, said his agency has

issued a number of citations to the Smyrna center. However, after each annual inspection, state officials simply accepted Straight's plan to correct violations and never followed up to see whether changes were made, Peterson said.

Some violations cited since 1999 include having only two professionals on staff for more than 120 adolescents, not having a registered nurse on site to supervise medications and provide treatment and allowing patients to restrain other patients.

In other states, similar violations have resulted in swift action.

Last July, after being notified that its license to operate in Virginia was not being renewed, Straight moved its operation to Maryland. State licensing authorities there soon cited the program for violations and say they are now sending inspectors to the center weekly.

Maryland Health Secretary Nelson Sabatini put Straight on probation Sept. 16 and ordered director Eugene J. Noto to correct 38 violations, including that Straight begin providing school instruction.

Maryland officials also have ordered Straight to stop the host-home program.

Georgia officials are not sure whether Straight's home-placement program falls under the definition of child placement, but say they are studying the law.