

## Smyrna clinic's methods still questioned

By Don Plummer

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SMYRNA — A Smyrna drug treatment program is part of a national chain that uses controversial methods that have resulted in two states ordering its centers to close this year.

Texas and Virginia took actions this year that led to the closing of adolescent drug programs operated in those states by Straight, Inc. While complaints have been filed against the Smyrna operation, state officials have taken only minor actions against the center at 2221 Austell Road. One reason is state law in Georgia is more lenient toward some of the activities that have created problems for Straight elsewhere in the country.

Although Straight claims its treatment centers have a 70 percent success rate in treating more than 50,000 people over 15 years, disgruntled clients say the numbers are inflated and that mental and physical abuse are common treatment methods.

Controversy has followed Straight since its founding 15 years ago in St. Petersburg, Fla. Each of the program's centers in Georgia, Florida, Maryland, California, Michigan and Massachusetts have at one time or another been targets of lawsuits, state investigations or complaints from former clients.

Over the years, clients have charged that they were imprisoned, beaten, stripped, abused, starved and restrained for hours as part of the program's aggressive anti-drug therapy, according to published reports and government documents from each state.

Officials at the local center and its national headquarters insist their programs have done nothing wrong, but acknowledge they have modified the program after complaints and lawsuits about some of its methods.

The Smyrna center has been in existence for nine years and is one of six Straight centers in the country. It is the only Straight facility in Georgia.

The Smyrna center treats patients from several states — usually from 70 to 80 clients at a time, according to clinical director Sonya Burton.

"We have 72 in group [therapy] today," Ms. Burton said Friday. "That is about average."

Critics charge, however, that the center has housed almost twice that number. One former counselor, who asked not to be identified, said he quit after being required to deal with up to 50 patients at once.

A state human resources official confirmed that his agency cited the Smyrna center in March 1990 for having only two professionals treating more than 120 adolescents.

"We conducted [annual inspections] at the center during 1989, 1990 and 1991," said Martin Rotter, regulatory services director of the Department of Human Resources. Rotter said that in addition to a number of recordkeeping



Staff photo by Don Plummer

Elizabeth Steiner was one of four protesters in November outside the Smyrna Straight, Inc. drug treatment center on Austell Road. The four were former patients of a Straight center in Florida.

See CLINIC, Page 2B

# Clinic

Continued from Page 1B

and training violations, the center was cited for not having a nurse in attendance on a routine basis during a four-month period and allowing patients to restrain other patients.

Although several Georgia officials said they would investigate any complaints, Rotter said his agency has no record of checking whether the center corrected violations that were cited. Rotter said information on whether Straight had corrected the problems cited during the three-year period was missing from state records.

Other states in which Straight has run afoul of statutes have taken stronger action, including banning the program.

Treatment experts say drug abuse by teens and younger children is a problem that affects half of all families in America today. While overall drug use by high school students is down over the past decade, several national studies indicate that up to 20 percent still require treatment.

Since the need for adolescent drug treatment is so widespread and expensive, alternatives to traditional hospital-based programs have widespread appeal.

Locally, officials at several drug abuse programs say in-hospital treatment can cost \$20,000 a month or more. Alternative programs like Straight that treat patients who continue to live at home or half-way houses can cut that amount in half.

Financial director Mike Fay said three months at Straight costs \$13,825. Fay said that amount covers a \$100 admission fee and \$600 in physical and psychiatric evaluations and a decreasing daily charge. The center charges \$200 a day for the first two weeks and then drops the charge to \$150 a day for the next month and then \$125 a day through the end of the three-month treatment program. After 90 days, Fay said, treatment is continued as needed without additional charge.

Most insurance companies pay for treatment at Straight. Fay said the average policy pays about "50 percent to 80 percent" of the total cost.

Officials at the center say another controversial aspect of the Straight program — which has led to closings and legal challenges in other states — helps hold costs down by housing clients in the homes of other Straight patients and requiring parents of the patients to participate in fund-raising events and work at the center on an unpaid basis.

Housing costs are absorbed by host parents who house new clients during the first phase of treatment. After that, charges are negotiated between parents. Fay said the cost of the "host home is settled between parents and is usually no more than if the child is at home."

All families, including those from other towns, must attend group sessions at the Smyrna center twice a month. They are also required to stay with other Straight clients on trips to the Smyrna center.

Political support for the Straight organization comes from the highest levels. Pictures of President Bush, former First Lady Nancy Reagan and TV host Oprah Winfrey, all posing with Straight officials, adorn the local center's lobby.

The Smyrna Straight center was picketed in November to protest alleged mistreatment of patients at other Straight locations. The picketers, all from a Tampa, Fla., support group — Community Improvement, made up of former Straight clients — said they wanted to draw attention to alleged abuse at other centers and recruit dissatisfied current and former clients of the local program.

Rotter said that in March 1989 the Smyrna Straight center was cited for violations, including failure to keep records of staff training, failure to maintain a file of complaints against the center, and failure to have a written policy for handling complaints.

The center's patient treatment plans were also not being updated every 60 days as required by state law. There were no lab test results in some charts and at least one record did not include a signed host home agreement.

Unlike some other states, the host home program is not illegal in Georgia, Rotter said, since there is "no change in parental guardianship." However, the center is

required to train host parents, something they did not have records for when state inspectors visited the center.

While not proving that training did not occur, state inspectors found there was also no schedule of training and no written guidelines for meals at host homes or records of emergency training — all required by state law.

Despite the numerous violations, Rotter said that state officials accepted a written plan to correct the violations, though the state never followed up to make sure the procedures were changed.

Again in 1990, state officials found violations at Straight, including instances in which patients were acting in an unauthorized manner, such as physically restraining other patients.

"They were cited for violating policy that restrains be performed by program staff only," Rotter said. "There were times when clients were directed by program staff to restrain other patients."

In another incident the program was cited for keeping an 18-year-old patient overnight even though he refused to sign a consent form. No action was taken after the patient was allowed to leave the facility the next day, Rotter said.

Other violations cited this year included complaints that a patient's parent did not know that he was living in a host home and that another client was hit by a staff member. Straight officials told Rotter that the staff member was fired after the incident.

# New York

Continued from 4B

WacPS 1.70	340	28	+ 4%
WacPS 1.50	314	20	+ 4%
WacPS 1.30	288	16	+ 4%
WacPS 1.10	262	12	+ 4%
WacPS .90	236	8	+ 4%
WacPS .70	210	4	+ 4%
WacPS .50	184	0	+ 4%
WacPS .30	158	-4	+ 4%
WacPS .10	132	-8	+ 4%
WacPS 0	106	-12	+ 4%
WacPS -10	80	-16	+ 4%
WacPS -20	54	-20	+ 4%
WacPS -30	28	-24	+ 4%
WacPS -40	2	-28	+ 4%
WacPS -50	-2	-32	+ 4%
WacPS -60	-26	-36	+ 4%
WacPS -70	-50	-40	+ 4%
WacPS -80	-74	-44	+ 4%
WacPS -90	-98	-48	+ 4%
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WacPS -110	-146	-56	+ 4%
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WacPS -130	-194	-64	+ 4%
WacPS -140	-218	-68	+ 4%
WacPS -150	-242	-72	+ 4%
WacPS -160	-266	-76	+ 4%
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WacPS -780	-1754	-324	+ 4%
WacPS -790	-1778	-328	+ 4%
WacPS -800	-1802	-332	+ 4%
WacPS -810	-1826	-336	+ 4%
WacPS -820	-1850	-340	+ 4%
WacPS -830	-1874	-344	+ 4%
WacPS -840	-1898	-348	+ 4%
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WacPS -860	-1946	-356	+ 4%
WacPS -870	-1970	-360	+ 4%
WacPS -880	-1994	-364	+ 4%
WacPS -890	-2018	-368	+ 4%
WacPS -900	-2042	-372	+ 4%
WacPS -910	-2066	-376	+ 4%
WacPS -920	-2090	-380	+ 4%
WacPS -930	-2114	-384	+ 4%
WacPS -940	-2138	-388	+ 4%
WacPS -950	-2162	-392	+ 4%
WacPS -960	-2186	-396	+ 4%
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WacPS -980	-2234	-404	+ 4%
WacPS -990	-2258	-408	+ 4%
WacPS -1000	-2282	-412	+ 4%