

NEWS UPDATE



STRAIGHT PROGRAM: Center made minor changes.

Drug treatment center cleared of wrongdoing

A Cobb County drug treatment center that was taken to court by the American Civil Liberties Union in January has made minor adjustments in the way it operates. But the center has been cleared of any wrongdoing by a three-month investigation that grew out of the court action.

The ACLU went to Cobb Superior Court in January to force Straight Inc. to release five teenagers the ACLU said were being held against their wills at the drug-abuse rehabilitation center on Austell Road in Marietta.

Four months after the hearings, the center has added a psychologist to its staff and has obtained a temporary state permit to operate. But Straight Inc. emerged unscathed from the court action.

After two days in January of closed court hearings and meetings between attorneys and Straight officials, the civil liberties union and the drug treatment center agreed to lead an independent committee

investigate the treatment center.

The suits were dismissed in early March, shortly after the committee was formed, according to ACLU attorney Kathleen Wilde. "As far as the panel's concerned, the whole thing is over now," Ms. Wilde said Friday.

The panel was formed principally to investigate charges that Straight was holding teenagers against their wills, physically abusing them and brainwashing them.

The panel consisted of Fulton County Superior Court Judge Jack Etheridge, psychiatrist Dr. William Wieland and Marilyn Benveniste, a consultant on public speaking.

Panel members and attorneys for both the ACLU and Straight were not allowed to comment on the investigation or its results, under the terms of the settlement, according to Ms. Wilde.

Straight director Dave Tilley, a former middle-school principal in Cobb, said he was "very excited

about the complimentary approach" the committee took.

"They had total access to the center, our records, everything — and found no abuse," Tilley said. "Basically, the only recommendations they made were administrative."

Department of Human Resources official Carroll Benson said Straight — unlicensed by the state when the litigation began — was issued a temporary license April 1.

In addition to tightening up several "technical, picky details" required by the state, the center has added a psychologist, Benson said. He added that he found no evidence of brainwashing at Straight.

"I wouldn't call it brainwashing," Benson said. "Most accepted drug programs involve a substitution of ideas and a rethinking of how you deal with stress. If you'd say Alcoholics Anonymous is brainwashing, I guess you'd say Straight is brainwashing."

— Kathryn Streever