

# State May Probe Complaints Aired On Drug Program

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Complaints of coercion and brainwashing by Straight Inc., a three-month-old drug rehabilitation program in Clermont County, might prompt a state investigation.

The Cincinnati chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, which is investigating the complaints, has not taken legal action so far.

But Jonathan Schiff, an ACLU co-operating attorney, related the complaints in a letter in mid-March to the Ohio Bureau of Drug Abuse and asked for an investigation of the program, which treats people aged 12 to 21.

HE SAID the ACLU has received four complaints about Straight — one from an 18-year-old girl who said she escaped after eight days in Straight; a second from Thomas ██████, the father of a teen-age boy now in the program; a third from a family member of a client, and a fourth from "someone familiar with the program."

In general, the complaints charge that Straight illegally coerces teen-agers into signing themselves into the program, accepts clients who do not have serious drug problems, uses treatment techniques which might violate the clients' civil rights and employs brainwashing methods similar to those used by certain religious cults.

"At this point, we don't know how much truth there is to these complaints," said Allen Brown, ACLU general counsel. "You have to realize these are young people in conflict with their parents."

Stewart Bell, chief of the Ohio Bureau of Drug Abuse, failed to return *The Enquirer's* telephone calls.

Ken Wolfe, the drug abuse agency's field services administrator in Cincinnati, said he had not seen a copy of Schiff's letter.

"I CAN'T say whether we'll investigate or not, but we'll be willing to work with them (the ACLU) to see that their concerns are looked into," Wolfe said.

The 18-year-old girl told the ACLU that she went to Straight's facility at 6074 Branch Hill-Guilnea Pike, Mount Repose, at the urging of her parents.

She said seven clients joined her in an interview room and prevented her from leaving. Then,

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Straight staff members verbally harassed her and threatened her with court action if she didn't sign herself into the program. She said she tried to leave the room once during the six-hour interview but was stopped by a staff member who allegedly pushed her against a wall.

Because of the threats and pressures she signed herself into the program.

She complained that she was forced to sit for hours at a time and participate in "rap sessions," in which clients would stand up one at a time and confess past behavior. Between confessions, the group would sing songs.

CLIENTS WERE allowed to go to the bathroom only at specified times. The girl, along with other clients in the first phase of treatment, were accompanied constantly by a client. The guardian clients would hook their fingers in the new clients' belts or belt loops and go with them everywhere—even to the bathroom, she said.

She was permitted no contact with the outside world. She had no access to television, reading material or telephones, she said.

After spending 12 hours at the facility, she would stay at the house of an advanced client's parents as part of the agency's foster home program.

She said she escaped after eight days in the program, and has no intention of returning.

THOMAS ██████ Cincinnati, took legal steps in January to try to have his son removed from Straight.

He said that when his former wife, Winifred Kessler, first mentioned the idea of placing their son in Straight, he voiced strong objections. He said the program's treatment techniques may be justifiable in cases involving hard-core drug users, but that his son was not in that classification.

"He didn't have what I would call a drug problem," ██████ said. The boy, now 18, was a moderate marijuana user, he said.

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# STRAIGHT

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"His grades had improved over the last two years. We weren't even close to being desperate as far as his drug-taking was concerned. I would place his drug use in the recreational area rather than the dependency area."

██████████ DISCOVERED that his former wife had placed their son in Straight Jan. 9. His attorney, Stephen Hayhow, filed a complaint Jan. 20 in Hamilton County Common Pleas Court, asking for the discharge of ██████████ son from Straight and for damages.

The suit contended that ██████████ son was illegally placed in the program and that the program has wrongfully denied him liberties and has impaired his health. The suit named Straight and Ms. Kessler as defendants.

But the case was dismissed recently because ██████████ son is 18 and had signed himself into the program.

Ms. Kessler, Cincinnati, disputed her former husband's statements about their son and about Straight.

THEIR SON'S use of drugs was serious enough to warrant his placement in Straight, she said. Ms. Kessler said ██████████ has not

seen their son enough in the past two years to speak with accuracy about his drug involvement.

Her son entered the program because one of his best friends has been in Straight for a year. The friend had been sent to St. Petersburg, Fla., where Straight began five years ago, and was transferred to the organization's program in Clermont County when that opened in January.

In order to see the friend, her son had to be cleared by the Straight staff. Hoping that her son would enroll in the program, Ms. Kessler took him to the Mount Repose facility.

After a 90-minute interview, he signed himself into the program. She said no one deceived her son or intimidated him into entering the program.

She said her son could have quit the program anytime, but chose to stick with it. He has progressed enough so that he is spending nights at home with her and soon will be ready to re-enter school, she said.

"He's getting himself together, and I feel good about that," said Ms. Kessler.

SHE SAID she believes the techniques Straight uses are necessary to bring about a lasting, positive change in the teenagers it serves.

A teacher and a counselor of teenagers for 25 years, she said she studied drug programs all over the country before deciding that Straight would be best for her son.

The charges raised against Straight's facility in Mount Repose are similar to those lodged by the ACLU's Atlanta chapter against the agency's center in Marietta, Ga., earlier this year.

Straight and the ACLU there agreed to name an independent committee to judge the program's admission, treatment and discharge procedures.

Schiff said the program's screening process does not distinguish between heavy and occasional drug users. "I was told by someone in a position to know that a boy who was not on drugs was put in the program because he had attitude problems," he said.

The ACLU's primary concern, he explained, is whether the teenagers' civil rights are being violated.

"The big issue," Schiff said, "has to do with the rights of children versus the rights of their parents."