

ACLU says complaints prom

By Ramon G. McLeod
and Nancy Barlier
Post Staff Reporters

The director of the American Civil Liberties Union in Cincinnati said Thursday that an investigation into Straight Inc., a drug rehabilitation center in Clermont County, has been prompted by a series of complaints from persons she described as "escapees."

One of those complaints came from a teenager who was alleged to have been thrown to the floor during a therapy session and held down by other clients after "not giving the answer to a question they wanted to hear," the ACLU director said.

Margie Robertson said the ACLU asked the Ohio Bureau of Drug Abuse to investigate Straight after hearing allegations from former clients who complained about some of the techniques supposedly used at the non-profit center in Mt. Carmel.

SHE SAID separate interviews with a number of former clients and parents, whom she refused to name, has led the ACLU to "have some heavy concerns about whether the rights of these children are being violated."

She said these included allegations that verbal confrontation is used routinely, that tactics designed to break down a child's sense of self are commonplace and that the voluntary program

does not permit clients to readily leave the facility.

The state bureau conducted a three-day investigation of Straight last week, based on the concerns raised by the ACLU, according to Stewart Bell, director of the drug abuse bureau.

He said a report is being prepared for submission to the Governor's Advisory Council June 18, but would not comment further.

JERRY RUSHING, director of Straight, said allegations of mistreatment made to the ACLU were untrue.

"I won't deal with any specific cases, as well as any individuals, but I know the allegations that have been made and they are false, they are not true," Rushing said.

"Whenever terms like 'abuse,' 'brainwashing' and 'coercion' are thrown around it perks ears," he said. "There is no doubt that Straight is tough, I have no apologies for that, it is not an easy program, but neither is treating drug abuse. We are a tough program that develops a lot of commitment from parents and the kids in the program."

Cynthia ██████ 18, Mt. Carmel, is among those who talked to the ACLU about Straight, Mrs. Robertson confirmed Thursday.

MISS ██████ said this week she was coerced into joining the program. She said she no longer uses drugs, but that her parents wanted her in the program because she is a lesbian and they do not approve of her lifestyle.

On May 2 she "escaped" from the home of parents, Robert and Sharon ██████, so that she would not have to return to the program, Miss ██████ said Thursday.

Her father filed a criminal damaging charge against her for breaking a bathroom window. The charge, a misdemeanor, was filed in Clermont County.

Her father said he took the action in the hope that if she is convicted she will be put on probation that would require her to be in a drug rehabilitation program.

MISS ██████ surrendered to authorities Wednesday.

She claimed Thursday that her parents threatened that she would never see either of them or her brothers again if she did not enter the program.

Her father said no such threat was ever made. Once in the program, she claims she was prevented from leaving. She claimed on one occasion she was tackled by 15 to 20 girls who held her down on the floor for 20 minutes after she demanded to be allowed to go home.

Her father said in an interview that her daughter's reported lesbianism was "a second problem to drug dependency... That would be a relief to find out that's the source of all these problems."

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"IT'S NOT EASY to air your dirty laundry on Main Street," he said, while adding that he would not have made the problem public by filing a charge unless he felt strongly about it.

ACLU's Mrs. Robertson said it has been the similarity of complaints brought by former Straight clients that prompted the call for the investigation.

"From what we hear, the program sounds similar to deprogramming," she said.

"It is a strict program," Rushing said. He said former program participants have criticized Straight because it is as tough as it is.

However, he said that 50 to 60 percent of those who complete the 11-month program successfully stop using drugs and entrance is voluntary.

IN THE FIRST phase, the youngster spends all day at the center and goes home at night with a client who has reached a higher level in the program who is called an old-timer.

As the participant progresses, he earns the right to go home, to school and to work.

Mrs. Robertson said the peer pressure and regimen was apparently too much for those who complained to the ACLU.

She said one child who said she could no longer tolerate the program claimed she jumped out of a moving car en route to Straight from the home of an old-timer.