

Straight Talk about Straight Inc.

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Columbia's Oakland Ridge Industrial Center has a new tenant -- Straight Inc., an often-controversial, Florida-based substance abuse program. Inside the newly occupied quarters, about 70 youthful clients, most with middle-class and upper-class backgrounds from North Carolina to Delaware, go through a seven-day-a-week hell of confronting drug or alcohol addiction. Separation from parents (except in structured situations) and peer confrontation, pressure and support are hallmarks of Straight's unorthodox methodology -- by all accounts, a grueling, soul-searing process.

Show up on a Monday or Friday, when parents visit for ` mandatory ``rap" sessions. Outside you'll meet a few media-savvy pickets -- some parents, some ex-clients -- ardently opposed to Straight Inc. Fervently, they accuse the 12-year-old organization, which claims more than 1,000 clients nationally, of being poorly managed to the point of physically abusing clients.

A few unhappy pickets are one thing, but there is more. Straight moved to Columbia several weeks ago from Springfield, Va., opting not to pursue re-licensing after being accused of violating numerous Virginia regulations in the last three years. Not least was a legally binding consent agreement 13 months ago that committed Straight to making changes, including upgrading facilities, stopping clients from physically restraining other clients and providing education for school-age clients. A follow-up inspection six months later produced 76 violations of the agreement and of state regulations, Virginia officials say. Straight claimed harassment and moved out before action against its license could occur. Mental health authorities in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Florida have acted against the group for similar reasons.

Straight's leaders can be disarming. They let reporters sit in on counseling sessions and talk with clients. They readily discuss their critics' complaints, even acknowledging that a few clients have been injured (they say revised methods preclude that possibility). They proselytize articulately, holding that they're open to change, that mistakes are unavoidable in addiction rehabilitation's uncharted waters. They claim a startling 70-percent recovery rate. More than a few clients swear convincingly that Straight saved their lives.

Straight Inc. needs Maryland certification within a month. So emotionally-tinged and complex is this case, the required review by state mental health investigators is taking more time than normal.

Straight's tough curative approach to one of society's most vexing problems has produced undeniable successes. But Maryland regulators should ``just say no." Judging from Virginia's experience -- and it's not alone -- the debatable baggage accompanying Straight to Columbia includes too many broken management promises over too much time to be glossed over in new surroundings.

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