

DRUG ADVISORY BOARD DECLINES TO TAKE POSITION ON STRAIGHT

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Despite criticism of Straight Inc. by board members and health care professionals, Howard County's Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Advisory Council has opted not to take a stand on the controversial drug treatment program.

After nearly an hour of testimony Thursday from former Straight clients and board members who said the program's troubled history put a black mark on drug therapy, council chairman Gerald N. Richman told members that "this issue is not one to be decided by us."

Although the board sent a letter to County Executive Charles I. Ecker stating that "there are some very real concerns with Straight," the board will not become involved in lobbying for or against the program, Richman said.

"I'm dead set against expressing an opinion one way or another," said Richman, noting that the board "just doesn't have the expertise" to evaluate the merits or weaknesses of the Straight program.

Straight, a national drug treatment chain that has been accused of abusive practices, moved to Columbia July 29 after losing its license to operate in Virginia.

Richman said that Straight's future in Howard County is in the hands of the state Alcohol and Drug Abuse Administration, which he said is better equipped to evaluate whether Straight meets state standards.

The county alcohol and drug abuse board acts as a recommending body to the county executive and does not have authority over drug treatment programs.

"We can't just step into that area. We know nothing about it," Richman said.

State officials concluded their inspection of the Straight facility in Columbia Friday and will make a decision within 30 days. If certification is not granted, Straight will be forced to leave Maryland.

Several council members who are substance abuse specialists from the county-based Orchard Hill, Oakview, and Changing Point treatment programs argued that the county board could and should participate in deciding Straight's fate.

"I think the board does have a role here. I have concerns about a treatment program that loses a license," said Bonnie L. Goldschmidt, the executive director of Orchard Hill treatment center in Columbia.

"And when there are lawsuits pending against that same program, I have even more concerns," she said.

The county board should offer its recommendations on "quality control" issues, Goldschmidt said.

Dave Ennis, an assistant administrator of Oakview Treatment Center in Ellicott City, said Straight's reputation could undermine the efforts of other drug treatment methods.

"Personally and professionally, I don't appreciate the program existing, because they give treatment a bad name," Ennis said. "All the controversy isn't doing treatment any good."

Council member Frank J. McGloin, director of Howard County's Addictions Services Center, submitted a letter stating, "Since Straight Inc. has had a very turbulent and questionable history, there needs to be a thorough and immediate investigation in my view."

Joy Yeager, community liaison for Changing Point rehabilitation center in Ellicott City, also said she had reservations about Straight, arising from comments from Changing Point clients who had told her of problems in the program.

The board heard from three Straight opponents who attended the meeting to urge the board to "take a moral stand, and take a stand on Straight's request for certification from the state," as Greg Reight of Columbia, whose son was in the program four years ago, put it.

Claire DeCunzo Martin, who also had a son in Straight, told the council that the program used strong-arm tactics to force youngsters to comply with its wishes.

"You don't need to be beaten in a drug treatment program," she said. "That's not the way to make it work."

Straight did not have a representative at the meeting.

- Caption: PHOTO PHOTOCLAIRE DECUNZO MARTIN Young people 'don't need to be beaten' Straight Inc.'s Columbia office will learn if it is permitted to stay open within the next 30 days. If the state refuses certification, the controversial drug and alcohol treatment program will be forced to move. PHOTO 1 PHOTO 2 THE HOWARD COUNTY SUN -- GEORGE HOLSEY
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