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Straight Inc. Accreditation Still in Doubt; Maryland Reviewing Restraint, Education

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Maryland officials have told **Straight** Inc. that their certification investigation focuses in part on whether the **drug**-treatment program involves restraining clients and offers academic lessons to adolescents in long-term care, sources said.

Straight officials said they are optimistic they will be able to allay Maryland's concerns. "I think there is a working relationship here . . . We'll answer the questions," **Straight** spokesman Eugene J. Nieto said.

Straight Inc. has been operating in a Columbia business park since late July while awaiting state certification. However, if **Straight** is denied certification, it must close in Maryland.

The adolescent treatment program, part of a national chain that operates in six states, moved to Maryland just days before it was to appeal Virginia's decision to revoke its operating license there. A Virginia official said the state was forced to do so because several unannounced inspections revealed repeated licensing violations stemming from the program's confrontational form of therapy.

Last Friday, Gene Heisler, a deputy director in the licensing division of Maryland's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, advised **Straight** of the state's concerns, which a source said include questions about **Straight's** restraint policies and education program, two areas that also drew attention in Virginia.

Straight's failure to enforce a restraint policy agreed to in a July 1990 consent agreement signed with Virginia officials was one factor that led the state to revoke its operating license, according to Jacqueline M. Ennis, an assistant commissioner who supervises Virginia's licensing activities.

Maryland officials also want **Straight** to explain how it will educate the juveniles in its care. Virginia officials said **Straight** was not providing instruction for school-age youths in the early phase of treatment in an effort to help them focus on breaking their **drug** habits.

"The problem we had is that the length [of early treatment] is unpredictable, and you might have a client out of school for a year or more. We felt that was unacceptable," Ennis said.

Straight spokesman Nieto said **Straight** is setting up an alternative education program for its school-age clients. He also said Maryland need not worry about **Straight's** restraint policies because "we don't do restraint at all."

Carol Benner, acting director of the Maryland health department's licensing and certification agency, said the state's

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review of **Straight's** operations is incomplete.

"We've reached no conclusion" about whether the **drug**-treatment program should be certified to operate in the state, Benner said.

One reason the certification process is taking time is that it has been expanded to include reviews by "our sister agencies, the Departments of Education, Human Services and Juvenile Services" in an attempt to see that **Straight** is abiding by all applicable state regulations, Benner said.

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