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The **Washington Post**

August 3, 1991, Saturday, Final Edition

Maryland Finds **Straight Inc.** Not Accredited; Accused of Abuse in Virginia, **Drug Center** Faces New Scrutiny

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SECTION: METRO; PAGE B1

LENGTH: 809 words

Maryland has sent a team of inspectors into **Straight Inc.**'s new Howard County facility to evaluate the **drug**-treatment program, and an official said yesterday that the facility is not accredited to operate in the state.

Rick Sampson, director of Maryland's Alcohol and **Drug** Abuse Administration, said he initiated the inspection after learning this week that **Straight's** accreditation by a national organization could not be transferred across state lines.

Straight closed its Springfield facility last week after Virginia officials accused it of violating state regulations. The program, which is part of a national chain of treatment centers for adolescents that has been criticized for its confrontational form of rehabilitation, then crossed the border and opened the Columbia facility.

Straight will be allowed to operate in Columbia until the certification process is completed, Sampson said.

The state has up to 30 days after completion of site visits to make a determination about whether the facility will be certified to operate, certified with conditions or ordered to close. "We're exploring all our options," Sampson said.

Maryland officials initially said that under their state's laws, **Straight** did not have to be certified because it already was accredited by the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. "The minute I communicated with JCAHO and found out there was a potential glitch, we had a certification team out the next day," Sampson said.

Straight's Springfield facility has been cited since it opened in 1982 for punishing clients by depriving them of sleep, drinking water, snacks, meals and visits with parents, allowing clients to restrain other clients and holding clients against their will.

Straight denied the allegations. Joy Margolis, vice president of public affairs for **Straight**, which is based in Florida, said the program has changed some of its controversial methods. She said the program was in full compliance with Virginia regulations when it closed, but **Straight** officials decided to move out of the state because they felt Virginia was harassing the program.

"We've corrected all those problems. The only thing the state would discuss is past problems," Margolis said.

Former clients have said they were punched, kicked, locked up, spat upon and allowed to take only 90-second showers. The program has been the subject of lawsuits across the country.

Straight claims a 70 percent success rate in treating clients between the ages of 12 and the early twenties.

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The program uses some well-known techniques, such as Alcoholics Anonymous's 12 steps, but former clients say **Straight** also uses confrontational methods to force clients to come to terms with **drug** or alcohol addictions. **Straight** officials say the program forces its clients out of denial and into recovery by positive peer pressure and family involvement.

Sampson said since news reports that the program had moved to Maryland, he has received a barrage of telephone calls from former clients and their parents who were involved in the program.

"I'm no longer receiving any supporting calls at all. Parents involved with the program and kids involved with the program basically are giving me horror stories, telling me things that cause me great concern in terms of this program," Sampson said. "And they are telling me recent history."

Sampson said the stories of recent experiences with the Springfield program are important because **Straight** has said that the alleged abuse happened in the past and no longer continues. "Now I'm hearing things from parents and youngsters that don't agree with that," he said. He would not reveal details of the conversations because the program is in the process of being certified.

Virginia officials found that **Straight** repeatedly violated state regulations, "posing a danger for **Straight** clients."

Jacqueline M. Ennis, an assistant commissioner for Virginia's Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, said this week that the state found new violations while **Straight's** appeal was pending.

According to officials, investigations revealed that clients were restraining other clients, a violation of state regulations. Although **Straight** was considered a voluntary program in Virginia, clients were physically prevented from leaving, officials said. The state also found that school-age clients were not receiving education, another violation of state regulations.

"I know of no other facility in Virginia where that is the case," said Randolph Reed, regional field supervisor for the licensing office in Virginia. "That is very unusual. We attempted for a long period of time to work with them on that issue. It was their position that kids should not be in school until they got a grip on their [substance abuse] problems."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

SERIES: Occasional

TYPE: MARYLAND NEWS

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