

STRAIGHT DRUG CLINIC'S METHODS TWISTED, PROTESTERS SAY - NEW COLUMBIA FACILITY SEEKING MARYLAND CERTIFICATION

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One of the nation's most controversial drug treatment programs has opened in Columbia amid protests, picket lines and legal wrangling over whether the facility will be allowed to operate in Maryland.

Six protesters carried picket signs Monday outside Straight Inc.'s office in the Oakland Ridge Industrial Park, denouncing the drug rehabilitation program for youngsters as violent and abusive.

The protesters said they expect to be picketing the office, which opened July 29, every Monday and Friday.

Meanwhile, two inspectors from the state Alcohol and Drug Abuse Administration have been conducting daily visits to the Columbia office, which is trying to achieve the necessary accreditation to operate in Maryland.

The facility is allowed to operate in Maryland while the certification process is under way, said Rick Sampson, director of the drug abuse administration.

While certification inspections normally only take two or three days, the Straight case has already taken a week. It will likely take several more days due to the controversial nature of the program's past, Sampson said.

Straight has come under fire across the country for its alleged heavy-handed rehabilitation techniques, which some former clients say involved beatings, starvation and verbal degradation.

Most recently, the program -- based in Florida and with eight centers in seven states -- was forced out of its Springfield, Va., facility after a long battle with state regulators.

Among the violations identified by Virginia investigators were use of physical restraints and failure to provide education for school-age clients.

"We're going to do a very thorough job in our inspections," said Sampson, who said he has received about 35 phone calls in recent weeks from "emotionally driven" people, both supporters and opponents of Straight.

"The feelings are very strong on both sides. There's no middle ground here," Sampson said.

"I've been overwhelmed with responses about the program's arrival here. All I've done for the last two or three weeks is handle Straight calls."

For Straight administrators, who have met with controversy and heated opposition since the program began in 1976, the fight to stay afloat in Maryland comes as no surprise.

The private, non-profit program currently treats about 1,000 youngsters nationwide, mostly from America's middle class. It does not belong to the Therapeutic Communities of America, as do many less-controversial drug treatment programs.

Therapeutic Communities of America subscribes to a code of clients' rights and does not condone the use of force.

Administrators in Straight freely admit that force has been used during rehabilitation, perhaps even wrongfully so, but the program is undergoing gradual changes, said Duke Cross, a spokesman for the Columbia facility.

"We often get maligned, unnecessarily. Straight is a pioneer in drug rehabilitation, and as a pioneer, we've broken ground. But we've also made some mistakes along the way," Cross said.

Cross said the program is trying to move forward after learning from its mistakes.

"Substance abuse as a field is only 20 years old," he said. "We're trying to break new ground. It wasn't that long ago when alcoholics were thrown into mental institutions."

The Columbia facility would be home for counselors charged with care for about 70 clients from as far away as North Carolina and Delaware. Each client undergoes seven days of therapy a week and stays with an area host family during the evenings.

Former clients of Straight facilities -- some of whom were out protesting Monday -- claim they were denied visitation rights to their parents during regimented rehabilitation that used forceful methods, including restraining and beating.

"Straight saved my life. I'd be dead if they didn't get me off drugs. But the way they do things has just simply got to change," said Laura Faehner, 18, a protester from Olney who entered the Straight facility in Virginia when she was 14 and spent nearly two years there.

Faehner said in some ways she appreciates what Straight did to get her off drugs. But the program "was too strict. You can never tell them you want to get out, or they'll punish you."

Food and sanitary conditions were extremely poor at the treatment center, Faehner said. At one point, she and four other girls in the program became sick, and "they made us all throw up in the same bucket."

Columbia is also home to Families Against Destructive Drug Rehabs (FADD), an organization of parents and former members of Straight who now oppose the program. The group, which organized Monday's protest, estimates that as many as 40 Columbia residents were enrolled in the Springfield, Va., facility.

"We're being made filthy by the presence of an abusive system that hides behind drug rehabilitation," said Greg Reight, a FADD member. "I'm frightened for the parents who use this program, who think they are actually doing good for their kids."

One Straight worker passed by the protesters in her car Monday and told the group, "I feel sorry for you."

Brian DeCunzo, a former Straight client holding a protest sign, told her, "Don't feel sorry for me. I'm not the one being brainwashed."

- Caption: PHOTO PHOTOCOLOR PHOTO THE HOWARD COUNTY SUN -- DENISE SANCHEZ Claire DeCunzo Martin of Columbia protests the opening of a Straight Inc. drug treatment center in that community. She is one of the founders of Families Against Destructive Drug Rehabs, a group headquartered in Columbia. FADD is composed of parents and former members of Straight who oppose the program. Straight's offices are in the Oakland Ridge Industrial Park. PHOTO THE HOWARD COUNTY SUN -- DENISE SANCHEZ Laura Faehner, 18, from Olney, who spent two years in a Straight program in Virginia, said it saved her life. But she criticized it as being "too strict."

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