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A '**Straight**' Answer Proves Elusive; Debate Over Tactics Trails Private **Drug** Treatment Program From Va. to Md.

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A red imprint of human teeth marked his back. He said it was a sign of abuse.

The 17-year-old, a recent client of **Straight** Inc.'s **drug** treatment program, recalled spit flying in his face during a confrontation with other clients at a therapy session. It dried on his cheeks because he was not allowed to wipe it off until he said he was a **drug** addict.

He remembered the morning he decided he couldn't take it anymore, and he ran. Other **Straight** clients chased him and caught him on Interstate 95 near Springfield, he said. They beat him in the face, bit him on his back and stripped him of his shoes, according to the youth's attorney, Sandra L. Havrilak, and an affidavit by a state trooper who was called to the scene.

The case of the youth, whose name cannot be used because he is a juvenile, was one of many violations Virginia officials said they discovered during a recent investigation of **Straight**, which had been appealing a January order to close.

The program, which is part of a national chain, closed its Springfield facility last week after state officials accused it of abusive practices. It reopened July 29 in Columbia, and Maryland officials are working to determine whether it meets licensing standards.

While many parents defend the program, the debate over its confrontational form of rehabilitation has followed it to Columbia's Oakland Ridge Industrial Park. A half-dozen protesters -- mostly former clients and their parents -- picketed the facility Monday and said more pickets will be back twice a week.

"We selected Mondays and Fridays because that is when parents who are involved in the program come to the meetings," said Gregg Reight, 47, a Columbia resident and adult educator whose son was once a **Straight** client.

Reight vowed to continue the protests "until they close down." He hopes for about 40 pickets Friday.

Also on Monday, Howard County inspectors ordered **Straight's** landlord to stop work on partitioning the building for **Straight** and another tenant, saying the proper permits were not obtained. But David M. Hammerman, director of the county's Inspections, Licensing and Permit Office, said the facility does not have to close as long as its activities do not take place in an area of the building that requires an occupancy permit.

Straight's landlord has since submitted renovation plans, and they are being reviewed, Hammerman said. Duke Cross, a

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Straight spokesman, said he didn't know about the county order.

Two state program inspectors have been at the center reviewing **Straight's** policies and procedures for the last week, according to Rick Sampson, director of Maryland's **drug** abuse administration. After the visits are completed, the state has up to 30 days to decide whether to certify the program, he said.

Maryland officials say they have received numerous calls from former clients and parents involved with the program who tell "horror stories."

But calls also have come from parents who said that without **Straight**, they would have completely lost control of their children who had turned to **drugs**. They say **Straight** saved their children's lives and mended their families.

Straight, which was founded in Florida in 1976, has been the subject of lawsuits, state investigations and complaints from some former clients who say they were imprisoned, beaten, stripped, abused, starved and held down for hours as part of the program's **drug** therapy, according to Virginia documents.

Straight denies the allegations and says any problems occurred under a previous administration. Said Joy Margolis, vice president of public affairs for **Straight**: "We've changed our policies [recently] to comply with laws in individual states."

Margolis said clients are allowed to leave the program if they want. She said only trained counselors restrain youths and only to protect them.

In Virginia, she said, the program was "in full compliance" with state regulations. But she said **Straight** was so harassed by state officials that it was forced to move, which she said leaves a gap in affordable **drug** treatment programs for adolescents.

"We really feel the families in treatment have suffered tremendously as a result of harassment by the state," Margolis said. "These are families who are really desperate and they feel that **Straight** has really saved their lives."

Jacqueline Ennis, assistant commissioner at Virginia's Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, said that since **Straight** opened its Springfield facility in 1982, the state has investigated several complaints. In January, the state ordered the facility to close, but gave it an option to appeal. **Straight** closed its Hampton Roads facility in February, also after the state accused it of abuse.

"Mrs. Margolis has consistently contended we were harassing them," Ennis said. "We have a clear list of violations of noncompliances with the consent agreement. If we were harassing them, and they felt they were able to demonstrate we were harassing them, they would have prevailed at the formal hearing, and yet they pulled out before presenting their case."

Ennis said the violations included clients restraining other clients, not providing education and inappropriate assessments in admitting children to the program. "They were admitting kids whose primary problem may have been psychiatric as opposed to substance problems," Ennis said.

Over the years, parents have turned to **Straight** when they said they had nowhere else to get help for their children.

Jan Washko, who lives in Frederick, Md., said she had spent thousands of dollars to have her 17-year-old son treated, but to no effect before she found **Straight**.

"He kicked holes in the wall," she said. "He had skipped school. He ended up stealing things from other people to get **drug** money. Before I took him [to **Straight**], my son told me he wanted to drive his car into a wall."

Washko said that after a year in **Straight**, "my son said he has a conscience again. He lost that when he was using

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drugs."

According to interviews with several former clients, the program has several phases, with clients progressing from one phase to the next as they improve.

During the first phase, former clients say, they spend most of the daylight hours in a warehouse setting, where they are confronted about **drug** abuse. They are constantly guarded. In the evenings, the clients are taken to a "host home," houses of parents of children in the program.

Host-home parents must secure their homes, former clients say. Windows often are nailed shut and doors are locked to prevent escapes.

Virginia officials said that because **Straight** was required to be a voluntary program, it was a violation of state regulations to restrain clients or keep them from leaving the program.

Supporters of the program deny abuse, but say measures restricting freedom are necessary to ensure that the adolescents confront their **drug** abuse problems. **Straight** says clients are treated with dignity consistent with health, safety and its therapy methods. Supporters say the techniques used are necessary to disconnect clients from their former world of **drugs.**

Critics call it brainwashing.

A 19-year-old who asked not to be identified said he was forced into the program four years ago. He said he was held down and his thumb was pulled back until he admitted he used **drugs.**

"They start confronting you. Yelling in your face. I was sent to the doctor once [after] I was punched so hard it broke some of the blood vessels in my eye. I was put on bread and water. I had to ask for food. They gave me 90-second showers: 30 seconds to get in, 30 seconds to lather up, 30 seconds to rinse off."

Washko, whose son is in the **Straight** program, says such problems are a thing of the past. "What happened five or six years ago is not pertinent to what is going on in the program today," she said. "Things have changed."

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