

STRAIGHT INC. COULD LOSE LICENSE OVER LEGAL STANDOFF - PROGRAM OFFICIALS, STATE WILL TRY TO RESOLVE ISSUE TOMORROW

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- Author/Byline: SUN STAFF; Michael James
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Administrators of Straight Inc., a drug treatment program struggling to stay afloat in Maryland, have set a meeting with state officials tomorrow in an attempt to resolve a key legal question.

At issue is whether Straight has been violating Maryland child placement laws by placing its adolescent clients in foster homes, a practice that Straight forcefully argues it has abandoned. State officials remain unconvinced.

"The issue hasn't been resolved," said Clarence Brown, spokesman for the state Department of Human Resources. "We're going to tell them Thursday what they have to do to comply with the law."

Straight's Columbia facility could have its operating license revoked if the child placement issue is not settled, Brown said.

The program, which is part of a national chain that has come under fire in some states for alleged mistreatment of youths, requires that its 40 clients live in "host homes" during the evenings.

State officials, who in September granted Straight a conditional one-year license to operate, ordered the program to cease placing clients in the host homes because the program lacks the required child placement license.

The host homes are still a component of Straight treatment, but program officials say that they no longer have a hand in the placement process. Placements into host homes are now handled primarily by parents of Straight clients, and Straight has no formal role in the process, they say.

State officials also have informed the parents that they must discontinue placing children in homes since they do not have the necessary placement license.

Dianne Nelson, director of resource development at the Straight facility in Columbia, said she hoped Thursday's meeting would clear up "misunderstandings" that have plagued the relationship between Straight and state investigators.

"We don't want what we're doing to be misconstrued. Child placements are not part of our program now and we are in compliance with the law," Nelson said.

Joy Margolis, a national spokesman for Straight, said in a recent interview that the arrangements for host home placements in Maryland are handled by supporters of the program and client parents who volunteer their time.

In a Nov. 25 letter sent to all members of Straight's host home committee, human resources executive director Charlotte King wrote that "We have detailed and extensive information that your group acts as an intermediary in the placement of Straight participants."

King also wrote that "We understand that your group visits and approves these host homes and makes assignments . . . as to where Straight participants reside. These activities, without a child placement license, are illegal."

Robert Hohman is one parent of a Straight client who received the letter.

Hohman said his son lives with him at home, as do most Straight clients. If the child's parents do not live in the Baltimore area, the child is placed into a home under an agreement with his or her parents, Hohman said.

"I don't understand why the state would have a problem with that. It seems as though they have us under a microscope," said Hohman, who said the program has helped turn his son's life around.

Straight opponents have argued that the host homes concept is too restrictive and that keeping the clients involuntarily housed is a violation of their rights. Fire and health code violations also have been alleged by former program members.

"I was forbidden to leave my host home, and they kept me locked in my room so I wouldn't leave," said Elizabeth ██████, a 16-year-old Columbia resident who spent three days in Straight before her parents took her out of the program in August.

Michael Golden, a spokesman for the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, which granted Straight its conditional license, said health officials are awaiting word on the placement issue before taking any action.

In November, state health officers reported that Straight was apparently in violation of the terms of its license, since some clients were not permitted to speak privately with their parents. Straight denied the allegations.

Golden said investigators plan to continue to make site visits to the Columbia facility, which is in the planning stage of being moved to another location in Columbia.

"We're looking at other buildings so that we can find a nicer facility," Nelson said. "We have no plans to leave Columbia."

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