

DRUG PROGRAM AGAIN ACCUSED OF VIOLATING STATE LAW

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Officials from two state agencies are once again putting the heat on Straight Inc., claiming that the controversial drug treatment program is not correcting violations of state law identified three months ago.

In recent letters from state inspectors, Straight is accused of ignoring the conditions of a Sept. 16 consent order, which had given the embattled program a tentative one-year lease to operate in Maryland.

Inspectors from the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene report that

Straight has violated the consent order by forbidding new clients to speak privately with their parents. The program's staff also has not followed recommendations of clients' independent psychologists, as the order requires, inspectors say.

In addition, inspectors are looking into two clients' claim that they were locked in a room at the Columbia facility with no means of escape.

Straight administrators, however, say they have been working hard to comply with the wishes of state officials and are puzzled by the allegations.

"Is it that they just don't want us? What more do they want us to do?" said Eugene J. Nieto, Straight's executive director in Columbia. "We are trying to work with the state, but no one seems to want to give us a chance."

Nieto said clients always are allowed to speak privately with their parents. "As for locking kids in rooms, that's absolutely ridiculous and unsubstantiated," he said. "But just to remove suspicion, we have since removed every single lock in the building. Not even my office gets locked."

Gene Heisler, deputy director for the health department's Office of Licensing and Certification, wrote in a recent letter to Nieto that he also had "other problems" with the program.

"There is not sufficient staff expertise on the premises to identify inappropriate management techniques and to work with staff in a manner which would enable them to understand and accommodate" the needs of some clients, Heisler wrote.

Since its opening in Maryland on July 29, Straight, which provides what it calls unique drug and alcohol abuse counseling for about 40 adolescents, has been the subject of intense debate between its opponents and supporters.

Amid the brewing controversy, state health officials granted the program a provisional license to operate here. The local program is part of a national chain that has faced opposition in several states for its alleged mistreatment of youths.

State health Secretary Nelson J. Sabatini can revoke Straight's license at any time during the one-year probationary period and order the program to leave Maryland. Inspectors have been doing site checks at the facility each week since its arrival.

"Right now, we are still trying to work with Straight, and Licensing and Certification does not feel that it's necessary to (revoke the license) at this point," said Michael Golden, a spokesman for the state health department.

Joy Margolis, a national spokesman for Straight, denied claims of any Maryland violations.

"This is not a game or a sham or anything else," she said. "We are playing by the rules and we are not circumventing any policies."

Another letter sent last week from the state Department of Human Resources warns the program that "unless we receive assurance and documentation that Straight has come into compliance with the consent decree . . . by Dec. 9, we will be forced to consider initiating legal proceedings."

Human resources officials' chief concern is that Straight has apparently been illegally placing its adolescent clients into foster homes, a practice that Straight previously promised to correct.

All of Straight's clients are required to live in "host homes" during the evenings. State officials ordered Straight in September to abandon the practice of placing the adolescents in the homes because the program lacks the required child placement license.

Straight continues to use the host homes but no longer is involved in placement of the children, Margolis said.

"Parents can do anything they want," she said. "If they choose to handle these arrangements among themselves, then there's nothing wrong with that. They're not acting as Straight agents."

However, human resources officials notified Straight that working indirectly through a "host home committee" to arrange placements for minors is also a violation of state law. The host home committee is staffed by parents of Straight participants, the letter said.

Heisler told Nieto in a letter that he also had concerns about a Straight client with a learning disability who was not getting special care from counselors, whom he said did not seem to understand the child's communication problems.

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