

Md. gives conditional OK to Straight drug program

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Straight Inc., a controversial national drug program whose Columbia center had been ordered to close for violating state laws, won conditional permission yesterday to operate in Maryland.

The state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene placed the Columbia center on probation for a year. If the program complies with state laws, it will receive full certification, said state Health Secretary Nelson J. Sabatini.

The decision reverses a Sept. 6 finding by state health officials that Straight could no longer operate in Maryland because it did not provide on-site education for its adolescent clients and had no child placement license.

In order to comply with state law, Straight will begin an education program today, with instruction provided by the county school system, state officials said.

To meet the state child placement regulations, Straight will make clients' parents responsible for arranging housing for their children, state officials said.

"We're pleased the whole thing is behind us and hopefully we can get back to the business of providing substance abuse treatment for kids and families," said Duke Cross, spokesman for Straight.

Straight, a non-profit national chain, treats about 1,000 youngsters in eight locations across the country. The Columbia center has 52 clients.

The program opened in Maryland July 29 after being forced out of its Springfield, Va., center in a battle with state regulators who said the center used physical restraints and provided no education for school-age clients.

Protesters have picketed the Columbia center several times in the past month to oppose the presence in Maryland of the program, which has been accused of using beatings and starvation.

"We have made it very clear that we will not tolerate those alleged practices in Maryland," Mr. Sabatini said. "And we will not make any judgments about the validity of the allegations."

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