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Straight Inc. Gets The Go-Ahead for Md. Drug ProgramDan Beyers, **Washington Post** Staff Writer**SECTION:** METRO; PAGE C1**LENGTH:** 753 words

Maryland's health secretary approved a consent order yesterday that allows **Straight** Inc. to operate its adolescent **drug**-treatment center in Columbia, ending for now the state's effort to close it.

The agreement places the program on probation for one year. **Straight**, which has agreed to modify its program, will be subject to on-site visits, record checks and generally heightened scrutiny during that time.

Straight arrived in Maryland July 29, just days before it was to lose its operating license in Virginia. Officials in Virginia said **Straight** failed to provide proper education programs for its clients, improperly allowed clients to be physically restrained and incorrectly assessed some clients' problems.

The consent agreement was reached on the eve of **Straight's** scheduled appeal of a Sept. 6 decision by Nelson J. Sabatini, Maryland's secretary of health and mental hygiene, to deny it certification.

Sabatini said, "There's no basis to deny someone the ability to operate in the state because of allegations of past problems. If they can stay in compliance and demonstrate that they are staying in compliance . . . then they can do business in the state."

Straight spokesman Duke Cross said, "We're comfortable with [the order]. It means we can finally get down to the business of treating our clients."

Straight's arrival in Maryland simply shifted the location of the debate over its confrontational form of therapy, a debate that has followed the program since it began in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1976. For every client who has alleged abuse, there are parents and adolescents testifying to **Straight's** effectiveness. For every **drug**-treatment professional who denounces **Straight's** methods, there are others who say those methods work.

Under the accord, **Straight** agreed to set up an education program for its school-age clients, some of whom will be taught at **Straight** and others in Howard County public schools. Previously, some clients were kept out of school, in violation of state law, state officials said.

The **Straight** center in Columbia, one of seven in six states, treats 52 adolescents during daytime hours and has been sending groups of four to "host homes" at night as a form of peer therapy, Cross said. However, Maryland officials decided the host-home process was akin to foster care and would need to be modified or licensed as such.

As a result of yesterday's pact, center officials will let client families determine the overnight arrangements for their children, **Straight** attorney Jack Eller said.

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"We're going to suggest that they [**Straight** client families] form a committee to coordinate" host family arrangements, Cross said. "But it is up to them."

News of the consent agreement upset detractors. "This is an absolute ruse. Of course **Straight** is going to remain involved [in overnight placements]. How could one parent meet another parent if **Straight** is not involved?" asked Gregg Reich, the parent of a former **Straight** client.

But Sabatini said **Straight** "better not" play a role in overnight placements. "They have to leave that up to the parents as well as the minors," he said.

While **Straight** was seeking certification, Maryland authorities heard from many parents who said the program's confrontational treatment methods saved the lives of their **drug**-addicted teenagers. They also heard from parents who alleged that **Straight** mistreated their children.

"Because of allegations of child abuse, the use of physical restraints, brainwashing, L&C [the health's department licensing and certification office] spent over 100 hours investigating **Straight's** program," a footnote in the draft consent agreement said. "Approximately one-half of the minors were interviewed alone, and the L&C staff talked with several host families. During its visits, L&C found no truth to any of the allegations."

Cross said he once jokingly considered suggesting that **Straight** Inc. change its name to "**Straight** Inc., the controversial **drug** treatment center" because of the negative publicity. "Now I'm going to suggest we call it **Straight** Inc., the vindicated controversial **drug** treatment center."

Straight officials said their program repeatedly has run into trouble because states are continually changing their ideas about what constitutes acceptable care.

"We're sort of pioneers in this unique system," said **Straight** consultant Eugene J. Nieto.

Straight isn't trying to "excuse the past," Nieto said. "We've made mistakes, but we're trying to change and improve."

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