

Straight Inc.

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Well before it moved into Maryland, Straight Inc. had a controversial reputation as a drug treatment program. Its tough approach to young people with drug problems has elicited complaints of abuse and cruelty, but also the testimonials of parents grateful for any program that shows promise of getting their kids off drugs.

This week state Health Secretary Nelson Sabatini approved an agreement allowing the center to operate on probation for one year. The arrangement, based on strict state supervision, is a fair way of letting the program prove whether it can carry out its treatment goals within the state's standards.

Earlier this month, the state health department ordered Straight Inc. to close its new operation in Columbia because it did not provide on-site education for its adolescent clients and placed young people in overnight accommodations without having a child placement license. The program had moved to Maryland in July after Virginia officials closed down its Springfield, Va., center following a controversy about the use of physical restraints and the lack of education for school-age clients. The program has also run into difficulties in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Florida.

Given this track record, the health department's caution is justified -- and careful follow-up of the consent agreement is essential. But effective drug treatment programs are all too rare, and despite criticisms of Straight's methods, many families swear by it. If the program can live up to Maryland's requirements during its probationary term, it deserves a chance to prove itself. If not, then it will need to move on.

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