

STATE HEALTH DEPT. GRANTS STRAIGHT A 1-YEAR TRIAL RUN - CENTER WILL BEMONITORED 'VERY CLOSELY' FOR VIOLATIONS OF CONSENT ORDER

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Straight Inc. has established a tenuous foothold in Maryland, where state officials have allowed the drug treatment center a one-year tryout that aims to put the program -- and the rumors and allegations against it -- to the test.

After 100 hours of evaluation, officials granted Straight's Columbia facility conditional approval last week.

"We will be watching them very closely. We haven't forgotten about the allegations we've heard, but to date we have seen no proof of them," said Nelson J. Sabatini, chief of the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

"I had parents call me to say they thought the program was a disaster, and I had others who told me they thought it saved their child's life," Sabatini said. "All I can say is that if Straight can operate in the framework of our statutory requirements, then they can operate here."

The 15-page consent order allowing Straight to operate spells out strict operating conditions that seem to address allegations against the program, which has been accused of strong-arm tactics and human-rights violations.

The order includes the provisions that Straight must allow clients to leave whenever they wish, must allow the youths privacy in bathrooms, and may only use restraints if a child is considered a threat to himself or others.

Where restraints are deemed appropriate, a Straight official must submit an incident report to a file that is readily accessible to state inspectors, the consent order states.

The program, which has been criticized for forcing drug abuse confessions from adolescents who later claimed they had no drug problem, is also not allowed to accept any client without a prior psychological assessment by a licensed psychologist.

Despite the detailed conditions, Straight officials say they are happy with Maryland's response to the program, which they say has been the target of unfair criticism and undue regulatory action.

Some states, such as California and Virginia, forced the program out after legal battles. Straight administrators admit past mistakes but argue that the program is evolving in an era that marks the dawn of scientific drug treatment.

"We believe Maryland recognizes that, and we believe Maryland may be setting a trend," said Duke Cross, a spokesman for the newly opened Straight facility in Columbia. "It's about time someone looked at us and found out we're not the monsters we've been made out to be."

Strong opposition has followed Straight to every city in which it has tried to establish itself, only to be met by supporters who say the program has been maligned and misunderstood.

Supporters argue vehemently that the strict program, which has seven centers in six states, is a pioneer in an age of ineffective and passive drug therapy. Those arguments are met with biting words from former clients and their families who say Straight violates the dignity of young people being subjected to substance-abuse paranoia.

Opponents allege beatings and cult-like conditions that put unnecessary stress on troubled adolescents. The talk of reform, they say, is not possible and not true.

"The drunken drivers of drug treatment have been given a learner's permit," said Greg Reight, a father of a former Straight client and one of the program's loudest opponents in Maryland. "But Straight's like communism. You can't reform it, you can only abolish it."

Supporters call the program a life-saver that uses harsh methods -- but not beatings -- to overcome serious drug dependency.

The program is heavily dependent on peer pressure and daily rap sessions that last as long as 10 hours, during which graduates of the program act as junior staff members. In the sessions, clients are required to confess to their past drug abuse.

"This is not a program for wimpy people. Straight is not for everyone," said Janey Herring, a Richmond, Va., resident whose 20-year-old son is undergoing therapy at the Columbia facility.

"Drug addict kids are con artists and manipulators. They need to be dealt with in a tough way," Herring said. "Straight teaches these kids a new way of life. The others don't."

The Columbia facility charges a flat rate of \$19,000 per client. Straight administrators claim a success rate as high as 70 percent for graduates, but opponents argue that 70 to 80 percent of the newcomers drop out within six months.

Straight's application for general certification was initially rejected due to the program's lack of a child placement license and an absence of on-site education for school-age clients.

But in a move that surprised its opponents, Straight resolved both issues. County teachers will be teaching small, supervised groups at the facility, and the program no longer plays a role in placing its clients in host homes, obviating the need for a child placement license.

Arrangements for clients' nighttime housing -- all 52 adolescents at the Columbia facility must still stay at the host homes -- are now handled exclusively by parents and community members, Straight officials say.

Professionals are still not sure what to make of Straight's arrival in Maryland, said Frank J. McGloin, director of the Howard County Addictions Services Center.

"I have no beef against the program. My interest is just in good treatment, but I think everyone in the field is very cautious about this place because of all the past allegations," McGloin said. "They're on probation in a lot of people's minds."

McGloin said his biggest concerns with Straight's operating philosophy are that the program does not solicit outpatient treatment prior to admittance and that counseling "seems to come more from the adolescents and not from licensed counselors."

Eugene J. Nieto, the executive director of the Columbia facility, said the program employs 18 staff members, seven of whom are counselors. Since its conception in 1976, Straight has always stressed the need for peer support in the treatment process, Nieto said.

"We do operate under a unique modality," Nieto said. "We are more successful than any other program because we are strict. But we are not punitive. People associate discipline with being punitive."

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