

Maryland orders Straight program to halt operation - Sabatini cites lack of on-site education

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Straight Inc., a controversial national drug treatment program, has been told to close its doors in Maryland because of violations of child-care laws, the state's health secretary said yesterday.

But Straight administrators, who spent about \$150,000 to open their Howard County center at the Oakland Ridge Industrial Park, say they will argue that they have been treated unjustly by state officials, who had given them tentative approval to operate here.

Nelson J. Sabatini, the chief of the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, said the 6-week-old Columbia center violates state law by not providing on-site education for its adolescent clients and by operating without a child placement license. Straight will be allowed to defend itself at an administrative hearing Sept. 17.

"Straight just sort of appeared in Maryland, and began operating under the assumption that their accreditation [from a private health care accreditation agency] would transfer here," Mr. Sabatini said. "But you can't do business in Maryland if you don't comply with the law in Maryland."

Straight, a non-profit national chain with eight treatment centers in seven states, has come under fire across the country for its alleged heavy-handed techniques, which some former clients say involved beatings and starvation.

In a letter to Straight officials yesterday, Mr. Sabatini wrote there is "probable cause to believe Straight is not providing for education for some minor children," a violation of the state's compulsory education law.

Straight lacks a license as a child placement agency, which Mr. Sabatini said is necessary because the program requires that its 51 clients stay in private homes overnight.

Straight has operated in Maryland since July 29 under provisional certification, which allowed it to treat clients while being evaluated by state officials.

Eugene J. Nieto, the acting executive director for Straight's Columbia office, called the state's decision "a disaster" and said it was unfair for Maryland officials to "let us operate here only to tell us that now we have to leave."

"We've got a considerable investment here," Mr. Nieto said. "We're going to have to fight this."

He said Straight would have satisfied the state's on-site education requirement by using four teachers provided by the county school system to teach at the center for six hours each week.

Peter Finck, the county's supervisor of pupil personnel, confirmed the plan, saying it would meet state requirements for "home or hospital bound" students, which is how clients in a drug treatment program are classified. He said the instruction was to begin Sept. 16.

However, Mr. Sabatini said, "the kids are supposed to be in school now, and they're not. You'll always hear a lot of promises, but the law says you must be in full compliance. I'm worried about the kids."

Straight moved to Columbia 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.

- Caption: PHOTOTHE SUN/GEORGE W. HOLSEY Straight Inc. has been operating its Columbia office since July.
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