

# Drug program may close

COLUMBIA (AP) — The state's health secretary wants to close down a controversial national drug program operating in Maryland after it violated state child care laws.

Nelson Sabatini, who heads the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, said Straight Inc.'s center in Columbia violates state law by not providing on-site education for its adolescent clients.

"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."

In a letter to Straight officials issued Friday, Mr. Sabatini said 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.

The center also does not have a license as a child placement agency. The license is necessary because the program requires its 51 clients stay in private homes overnight, Mr. Sabatini said.

Straight will be allowed to defend itself at a hearing Sept. 17.

Administrators, who spent about \$150,000 to open the Howard County center at the Oakland Ridge Industrial Park, said they have been treated unfairly by state officials, who they say gave them tentative approval to operate.

"We've got a considerable investment here," said Eugene Nieto, the acting executive director for Straight's Columbia office. "We're going to have to fight this."

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. Some former clients accuse the organiza-

tion of using beatings and starvation during treatment.

Straight has operated in Maryland since July 29 under provisional certification allowing the center to treat clients while being evaluated by state officials.

Mr. Nieto 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, said the teaching program would meet state requirements. Mr. Finck said instruction was scheduled to begin Sept. 16 but couldn't start until the state certified the center.

Mr. Sabatini said that Straight's clients should be in school now.

"You'll always hear a lot of promises, but the law says you must be in full compliance," he said. "I'm worried about the kids."