

Straight suffering setbacks - Drug program faces eviction in Howard

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The controversial Straight drug treatment program is facing eviction and a barrage of financial problems that may force it out of Maryland.

The Columbia program has lost half its clients since August, according to Straight's officials.

Also, court papers show that the treatment center has paid no rent to its landlord since arriving in Maryland six months ago. The \$42,726 it owes is "just another example of the madness going on here," said a Straight program administrator, asking not to be identified.

The facility, housed in an industrial park warehouse, was served a summons this week for non-payment of rent and has been ordered to a District Court eviction hearing March 2.

Straight moved to Maryland from Virginia amid a state licensing investigation there as well as a pending lawsuit over unpaid rent.

Straight's employees were recently told to expect delays in being paid and the employees have threatened a walkout, according to the administrator.

The program bills itself as a non-profit agency. Parents of clients raise between \$900 and \$1,500 a week through numerous fund-raising activities, and that money is wired daily to Straight's national headquarters in Florida, the administrator said.

Parents are also asked to contribute food and numerous other items to the day-to-day operation.

"They contribute toilet paper, trash bags, everything. I don't see why this business would have any financial problems. There's no overhead," the administrator said. "We don't know where all this money is going. They're obviously not using it to pay rent or salaries."

At one point, the phone company shut off service because Straight had not paid approximately \$400 on its bill, the administrator said.

Eugene J. Nieto, executive director of the Columbia facility, acknowledged that the program has faced some financial difficulties. Enrollment at the facility, located in the Oakland Ridge Industrial Park, is down from about 60 clients in August to 31, he said.

Both Mr. Nieto and Pam Watson, the business manager of the Columbia facility, said that Straight has paid rent every month and, according to their ledgers, is up to date on payments. But they refused to release those records.

While the program has tentative plans to stay in Columbia even if evicted, Mr. Nieto said, "We're about ready to chuck the whole damn thing and leave. We've got a program that does so much for people, and all we get is harassment."

The program, an outpatient treatment center for adolescents, has been criticized in several states for alleged abusive treatment of youths. Critics of the program also argue that Straight uses cult-like methods to force youths and their parents to raise large sums of money.

Officials of Columbia Management Inc., which owns the building, declined to comment on the eviction proceedings. In a Jan. 30 letter sent to Straight, Columbia Management leasing manager Darrell J. Nevin accused the program of having a "blatant disregard for your financial obligations to the landlord."

The program has six centers in five states. Income from those centers is typically pooled at the Florida headquarters office and distributed to the individual locations based on need, Mr. Nieto said.

"We're not unlike other people. We've been hit by the tough financial times," he said.

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