

## WHERE WILL STRAIGHT CLIENTS CONTINUE DRUG TREATMENT?

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State officials will meet with Straight Inc. drug treatment clients and their parents today to discuss where the adolescents should continue their therapy in the wake of the program's unexpected closing.

Meanwhile, a group of parents who were dissatisfied with Straight's management policies is hoping to start an independent program modeled after Straight.

The Columbia program, which is part of a national chain, will close Friday due to financial difficulties and a host of internal problems between the local program and Straight's corporate home office in Florida.

Several parents and administrators in the Columbia program have discussed opening a Straight-styled treatment center that would have no connection with Straight's corporate headquarters.

One parent involved with the discussions criticized Straight, saying the company had deceived parents.

"The kids have been hurt by all this," said the parent, who asked not to be identified.

Joy Margolis, the spokesman for Straight's Florida office, said the Mid-Atlantic region had not brought in enough admissions to Straight.

"We regret very much we can't keep the program open, but the recession has hit everyone too hard," she said.

Margolis said the program's other five centers "are doing very well," despite the bad economy. The program has counseled more than 50,000 family members since its creation 16 years ago, she said.

"If the parents in Maryland want to start a program modeled after us, then we wish them well," she said.

In the past two weeks, Straight's Columbia facility in the Oakland Ridge Industrial Park has been served a summons to court for non-payment of \$42,726 in rent and has been two to three weeks behind on paying employees.

One facet of Straight's philosophy is that parents must commit themselves not only to therapy, but to the program itself. Parents typically collected \$900 to \$1,500 a week through fund-raising activities, and all of the money was wired to the corporate home office, said a Straight administrator, who asked not to be identified.

At a meeting at the Columbia center Friday night, several parents complained that increasing financial pressures were put on them and questioned why the program wasn't paying its bills, the administrator said.

Also nagging the local program were exacting site visits from state officials, who watched the program intently since its arrival in Maryland on July 29. Straight, which bills itself as a non-profit adolescent outpatient program, emphasizes regimented peer pressure in its treatment and has been criticized in several states for alleged abusive practices.

But in several interviews since its arrival in Maryland -- and in a meeting last week before Howard County's Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Advisory Council -- local Straight officials said the program has evolved and overcome many of its earlier problems.

State inspectors, who granted Straight a provisional one-year license to operate in Maryland, identified several problems during site visits but none were considered serious enough to warrant a license revocation.

"Their leaving has kind of caught us off guard," said Rick Sampson, director of Maryland's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Administration, which has been monitoring the program.

"We've got a pretty good collaborative effort going, and we will be offering all of the kids a chance to go to other programs. No one will be left out," Sampson said.

About a dozen of the 31 clients enrolled at the Columbia program are Maryland residents and will be offered placement at any of the state's subsidized drug treatment programs. Out-of-state clients will be referred to private contractors deemed suitable for their needs, Sampson said.

Straight's corporate office also is offering to place the Columbia clients in any of its five remaining centers. Two treatment facilities operate in Florida, and others are in Massachusetts, Michigan and Georgia.

A letter sent to state officials Monday from Bernadine Braithwaite, Straight's national director, said the recession was the primary reason

for closing the Columbia program. The center's enrollment dropped from 60 in August to 31 in February.

Walter McLellan, head of the Changing Point drug treatment centers in Waldorf and Ellicott City, said he has been talking to Straight parents about transferring their children.

Between five and 20 Straight clients could be transferred to Changing Point treatment centers within the next week or so, he said.

Attending Changing Point costs about \$9,000 for a 30-day stay, although scholarships and financial assistance typically lower that cost, McLellan said.

Straight clients would be given a cost break of approximately \$2,000 to \$4,000, he said.

An Owings Mills woman who was at the Columbia Straight facility yesterday said she was there attempting to get a partial refund on the \$9,000 payment she had made on her 15-year-old son's treatment. The boy entered the program about 2 1/2 months ago, she said.

"Straight was helping him. I have a lot of confidence in the trained staff," said the woman, who did not identify herself out of concern for her son.

"But I'm having trouble getting my money back now, and I don't like what I'm hearing about how money has been managed."

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