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## **Straight Inc. Is Closing Md. Center; Drug-Treatment Unit Blames the Recession**

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**Straight Inc.**, which waged a decade-long battle with Maryland and Virginia regulators over its **drug**-treatment program for adolescents, is closing its only remaining center in the Washington area Friday because of financial problems.

The Columbia-based facility, which opened last July, has had financial difficulties for several months. Its landlord recently started eviction proceedings, claiming the nonprofit organization owed \$ 42,726 in back rent.

"We would like to continue to provide help, but these are tough times," said Joy Margolis, a national spokesman for **Straight Inc.** "Given the recession, many families are finding it difficult to afford the cost of putting their child in a **drug**-treatment program."

Enrollment at **Straight's** Columbia center had dropped to 31, and several of the remaining youths were ending their treatment, Margolis said. **Straight**, which will continue to operate five other centers in four states, typically handles about 80 clients at each facility. At one point, it had about 300 in the Washington area, Margolis said.

**Straight's** Columbia center, housed unobtrusively in the rear of an office and warehouse complex, was being emptied yesterday. **Straight** employees said the clients, who normally would have spent the day in treatment, have been told to stay home. "We're just finishing up with paperwork," one employee said.

Maryland Secretary of Health and Mental Hygiene Nelson J. Sabatini said the state will offer to help **Straight** clients find alternative treatment programs.

"My obligation is to the kids in that program -- not **Straight**, the kids," Sabatini said.

**Straight** officials have tangled with regulators in this region ever since the program moved to Virginia and opened a center in Springfield in 1982.

The program, which began in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1976, sparked controversy almost from the start as some former clients and their parents questioned its confrontational form of therapy, which relies heavily on rigid rules and peer pressure.

However, many other **Straight** parents and youths testified to the program's effectiveness. They said **Straight** worked for many young people who were not helped by other approaches.

**Straight** seemed to have weathered its early problems by 1985, when First Lady Nancy Reagan toured the Springfield

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center with Britain's Princess Diana, generating much favorable publicity.

But then, in early 1991, Virginia officials announced that they would not renew **Straight's** operating license because the center had repeatedly violated state policies. State officials said **Straight** had failed to provide proper education programs for its clients, had improperly allowed clients to be physically restrained and had incorrectly assessed some clients' problems.

**Straight** officials initially said they would fight the Virginia decision. Instead, two days before a scheduled appeal, they closed the Springfield center and moved to Columbia.

There, Maryland officials allowed **Straight** to operate after center officials promised to modify their program and to be subject to regular on-site visits and other scrutiny. Maryland officials charged in November that the program was violating the agreement and threatened to take action against the center.

Sabatini said regulators still had concerns about the program when **Straight** officials announced the center's closing yesterday. "It was a surprise to us," Sabatini said.

"It is a shame they won't be there to help others like they helped our daughter, who had a serious **drug** addiction," said one Maryland mother, who asked not to be identified. "**Straight** opened her eyes. It did for her what other programs could not do. If it wasn't for **Straight**, my daughter might be dead now."

But **Straight's** announcement brought cheers from Gregg Reight, 49, who said his son was mistreated by **Straight**. Reight and a tiny band of other dissatisfied families continually pressed regulators to shut the center down.

"I'm glad they are gone," Reight said. "But is our fight over? Five other centers remain open. We will continue to work to close them as well."

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