Straight departure from Columbia

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The economy has done what the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene should have done some time ago: Run Straight Inc. straight out of Maryland. Last week, in typical fly-by-night fashion, the controversy-ridden drug treatment program announced that it was closing its Columbia center for financial reasons. The news blindsided state officials, left 30-odd kids in the lurch and a Columbia landlord holding the bag for more than $42,000 in back rent.

No one should be surprised. Late last summer, after a bruising battle with Virginia regulators, Straight showed up in Columbia unannounced with a full-blown drug treatment program complete with on-site patients. This should have been a tip-off of trouble to come. It wasn't. Neither was a stormy past peppered with allegations of inappropriate admissions and forcing kids to remain in the program. In Virginia, where Straight signed a legally binding consent degree to correct past ills, state officials say a follow-up inspection produced 76 violations of the agreement and of state law. The program hit the road before regulators could revoke its license.

Amazingly, Maryland regulators convinced themselves that this was all in the past and granted the program a one-year provisional license. Reporters were allowed to sit in on counseling sessions. Past wrongs were discussed. There were earnest promises to do better. State regulators mounted an exhaustive monitoring and surveillance operation. In September, treading the same path it had in Virginia, Straight Inc. signed a consent order. By December, however, inspectors had logged several violations, including forbidding new clients to speak privately with parents, ignoring recommendations of clients' independent psychologists and allegations of imprisonment.

Why was Straight Inc. allowed to operate here in the first place? Health regulators claim they had no choice and that they feared a legal challenge. Yet even when numerous and repeated opportunities to revoke the provisional license presented themselves, regulators sat on their hands.

On balance, the Straight affair has caused minimal damage. Parents are scrambling to enroll their children in other programs. Some want to know what's happened to the $1,500 a week in fund-raising sent to the home office. But the price could have been much higher. If state regulators truly felt hamstrung by existing guidelines, the rules now should be tightened up. The sort of regulatory inaction that characterized Straight Inc.'s tumultuous stay in Maryland is no longer acceptable.

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