

Irving drug-treatment unit closes

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AUSTIN - STRAIGHT, an adolescent drug-abuse treatment program praised by gubernatorial candidate Clayton Williams for assisting his son and condemned by some critics as abusive, has closed its doors in Irving and left the state.

The Irving facility stopped accepting new clients Oct. 15 because of hard economic times, said Joy Margolis, vice president of public affairs for the non-profit corporation. She said yesterday that STRAIGHT has transferred about half its 50 Texas clients to other treatment centers around the United States and has dismissed those who were close to completing their therapy.

"I think you are aware there is a recession going on in the country for quite some time. Many people don't have money. We are non-profit, but it still costs money to run our facility," she said. The Irving facility was one of seven full-treatment centers run by STRAIGHT, which has its headquarters in St. Petersburg, Fla.

Janet Kennedy, an Austinite who founded a group called People Against Destructive Drug Treatment, said she was pleased to see the program go.

"I'm telling you they were not helping drug problems. It's run exactly like a cult," she said.

Williams, who made drug abuse and crime the top issue in his race for governor, visited the spartan STRAIGHT treatment center in an Irving office park on the first day of his race in June 1989.

In an emotional speech, he credited the program with helping one of his sons quit using marijuana.

The Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse licensed STRAIGHT as a chemical-dependency treatment facility in June 1986. State investigations in 1989 and 1990 indicated that the Irving facility on occasion violated state standards on housing and on using improper restraints on clients.

State regulators required the program to sign agreed

administrative orders in 1989 and 1990, promising to correct abuses. Violation of an agreed order is grounds for license revocation.

"We required certain things of them - some documentation of corrective plans, those types of things," said Mike Ezzell, director of the commission's program compliance division.

Youths in the STRAIGHT program were required to stay with Irving-area families who have a child in the program or one who has completed treatment. That kept costs down. Margolis said the yearly cost is \$13,300.

Until state regulators required a policy change in July 1989, some host homes were not required to have a toilet in the sleeping room but only urine containers, according to the 1989 agreed order.

The state also determined that some sleeping rooms were overcrowded and some clients did not have separate beds.

Advanced participants in the program and former participants hired as counselors on occasion "inappropriately restrained clients when clients were not a danger to themselves or others that did not meet licensure standards," according to the agreed orders.

"Those kids are kept in that warehouse all day," Kennedy said. "At night they were taken by their belt loop and put in cars and taken to homes of kids in advanced programs.

"They would be locked up in one bedroom. Sometimes there was no bed to sleep in. They are strip-searched, and clothes are put in different rooms at night. They call this abuse an integral part of the treatment," she said.

According to the documents, clients in 1988 and 1989 were improperly restrained for failure to move, failure to sit up properly, failure to attend to personal hygiene and yelling out in group.

In addition, a STRAIGHT employee was fired in April 1989 for choking and kicking a client, according to the agreed order.

One host family was criticized by state investigators for tying a client with a nylon automobile towing strap in March 1989 while

transferring the client from their home to the Irving facility.

"I don't think it's a harsh program," Margolis said. "Most of the criticism comes from many many years in the past, when there weren't many state regulations in existence. We comply with all state regulations."

She said the program's drop in clients is due to the economic recession, adding, "It's very unfortunate that the drug issue is not the hot topic these days as it was two years ago."

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