

Teen drug program opens office

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An unconventional adolescent drug treatment program that has drawn glowing praise and unprecedented criticism in Texas opened an education and counseling center in Austin Thursday.

The opening of Straight Inc. could be the first step toward establishing a treatment center here, officials said. The Florida-based company operates one Texas treatment center, in the Dallas suburb of Irving, and has opened education and counseling centers in Houston and Midland.

Carol Koenecke, administrator of the Irving center, said that of the 130 families who have teen-agers in the Irving center, Koenecke said, about 25 families are from the Austin area. But whether Austin eventually will get a treatment center "depends solely on the community support," she said.

Straight, which has nine treatment centers and more than 17 education and counseling centers nationwide, has been the subject of much publicity on its methods since the program began in 1976.

Texas gubernatorial candidate Clayton Williams has endorsed Straight's regimen, saying his son was successfully treated there. At the Austin center's opening Thursday at the Bank of the Hills Building, 13809 Research Blvd., dignitaries included the youngest daughter of President Lyndon Johnson, Luci Johnson Turpin, who donated the office space, and state Rep. Bob Richardson.

Gov. Bill Clements and Austin Mayor Lee Cooke sent proclamations welcoming Straight to the city, and the Texas House of

Representatives sent a state flag.

Straight's five-phase program begins with intensive outpatient treatment that relies heavily on peer counseling by other teens in more advanced stages of treatment. Eventually, the teen lives with host parents, who have a child in more advanced stages of the program. Finally, the teen returns home to live with his own family, and all members receive aftercare and counseling.

During a four-month period last year, the program received 15 complaints, more than any other in Texas, according to the compliance division of the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, which licenses treatment programs.

Several of the complaints that were found to be valid involved improper restraint of adolescent clients and inappropriate conditions - such as crowding - in some of the host homes.

The investigation resulted in an administrative order - agreed to by Straight officials - that the center adhere more strictly to commission standards for one year. Commission investigators will continue to make periodic checks of the program until December.

Asked about the complaints and the agreement with the commission, Koenecke said: "I don't think any treatment program is beyond help in training."

More than 35,000 family members have been treated through Straight, which claims that 70 percent of the adolescents it treats remain drug-free after the program. The national, industry-wide average is about 10 percent, treatment experts say.

- Caption: PHOTOLuci Johnson Turpin speaks at the opening of Straight Inc.'s education and counseling center in Austin Thursday. Turpin donated office space for the center in the Bank of the Hills Building, 13809 Research Blvd.Marc Fort

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