

Official Inquiry into the Release of Public Documents by the
Florida Department of Children and Families Concerning
Investigations of Abuse and Ambassador Mel Sembler

Prepared By: International Survivors Action Committee
(ISAC Corporation)
www.isaccorp.org

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International Survivors Action Committee will be referred to as ISAC for the remainder of this document.

The purpose of this document is to inquire into the repeated inconsistencies discovered during a review of public documents released to ISAC.

ISAC is requesting a full and complete explanation as well as supportive documentation for these inconsistencies.

ISAC is further requesting ALL public documents, including investigation reports and correspondence, by the State of Florida and/or DCF regarding SAFE, GROWING TOGETHER, and STRAIGHT, INC. from 1975 to present.

Substance Abuse and Family Education Treatment Center (S.A.F.E.)

ISAC requested an immediate investigation into this facility and information regarding previous complaints filed with DCF. A letter dated February 26, 2003 states that our concerns were discussed with Phil Enmenheiser of the Substance Abuse Program Office on February 25, 2003.

Mr. Enmenheiser indicated that he was aware of the S.A.F.E program in Orlando but had not received complaints about the facility.

ISAC finds this difficult to believe since ISAC forwarded copies of its 80-page S.A.F.E. report, which details several DCF investigations into S.A.F.E.

We respectfully request that Mr. Enmenheiser fully educate himself on the complaints and reports filed in order to facilitate an immediate and full investigation of S.A.F.E.

The Proven Misuse of Ambassadorship by Mel Sembler

An investigation into the handling of a child abuse complaint lodged against Straight, Inc. was undertaken on or about May 9, 1993. The purpose of this investigation was to:

- 1) Determine if there was a pattern of abuse or neglect by Straight Inc; and*
- 2) To determine if proper corrective /protective action was taken by HRS to prevent or stop improper action by Straight, with respect to the licensing issue.*

On May 19, 1993 Fred M. Gravious sent a completed report to Lowell Clary, Acting Inspector General, in regards to case # 92-0242.

The following excerpt is exactly as stated in the section entitled “Details of the Investigation:”

According to Ray T. Berry, program supervisor of the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health, District 7 program office (ADM), there were occasions when HRS received phone calls from state senators inquiring about the Straight program and letting it be known that they strongly supported the program, thus exercising a certain influence concerning Straight matters.

Further, during an August 22, 1989 follow up site visit to the St. Petersburg Straight facility, the HRS licensing team was prepared to recommend that the

Straight license not be issued because of lack of compliance on issues that surfaced during an earlier site inspection. While at the facility the team received a phone call informing them that no matter what they found Straight would receive their license. The person who received the phone call was Sue Heavner, however, she stated that she did not remember who made the call or exactly what they said.

Additionally, according to Harry Moffitt, senior human services program specialist with the headquarters ADM office, he was in a meeting with Dr. Ivor Groves, former assistant secretary, ADM, when a phone call was received by Dr. Groves. That phone call was made by Mike Becker, District 5 Administrator, and Martha Linderman, District 5 ADM. Mr. Moffitt stated that the phone call was concerning Straight licensing issues. During that phone call Mr. Moffitt recalled that Dr. Groves told Mr. Becker and Ms. Linderman to make it work.

In yet another meeting with Dr. Groves, Mr. Moffitt and Linda Lewis, former deputy assistant secretary, headquarters ADM, were discussing the concerns they had relating to Straight's practices. Ms. Lewis brought up the fact that other states had closed Straight because of the very same issues raised by Florida's HRS. That is, withholding medication, excessive use of force, withholding food, sleep deprivation, etc.

According to Mr. Moffitt it was at this point that Dr. Groves told Ms. Lewis "If you do anything other than what I tell you to do on this issue, I will fire you on the spot." Dr. Groves then turned to Mr. Moffitt and told Mr. Moffitt "the same goes for you." According to Mr. Moffitt, a short time later in the same meeting Dr. Groves stated: "There was a lot of pressure to get this thing resolved." Mr. Moffitt said that the statement about a lot of pressure to get this thing resolved was relating to the pressure from Ambassador Mel Sembler, one of the founders of Straight. According to Ms. Lewis, she remembers informing Dr. Groves of the problems with Straight.

Ms. Linderman stated that she was prepared to prevent Straight from renewing their license as a result of the August 22, 1989 licensing team's findings. She further stated that upon learning of the phone call received by the licensing team while at Straight facility, she and Mr. Becker called Dr. Groves on the speakerphone. Ms. Linderman stated that both she and Nike expressed their concerns for the clients under the control of Straight. Ms. Linderman stated that she did not remember exactly what Dr. Groves said, but she does remember that he told them he wanted Straight to get their license.

The OSIG's investigation indicated that Mr. Coler was contacted several times by Mel Sembler concerning Straight issues. It appears that Mr. Coler then called Dr. Groves about Straight.

Most of the physical abuses are centered around the use of restraints, but not limited to the restraints. Many instances of the restraints being used were against

clients while they were trying to leave the facility, or clients restraining other clients. Restraints were frequently used if a client did not sit in the chair in a prescribed manner. The clients were required to sit in their chairs for approximately 12 hours a day. During that time, they had to sit up straight in the chair, and at no time were they allowed to use the back of the chair for support. If a client used the back of the chair, then that client would be restrained.

Additionally, information surfaced indicating that Straight withheld medication from some clients and failed to provide follow-up medical treatment for other clients. Clients were knowingly placed in a dangerous situation by Straight staff and in at least one case injuries occurred that required emergency room treatment.

As a result of this type of history, HRS personnel became very concerned for the well being of the clients enrolled in the Straight program. As stated earlier in this report, the HRS licensing team was prepared to recommend that license not be issued to Straight. However, there were two factors that lead to the licensing of Straight; first, was the outside pressure mentioned earlier in this report, and secondly, was the limited authority given to HRS.

Findings:

The Inspector General's Office investigation revealed that there was a definite pattern of abuse or excessive force used against clients while at the Straight facilities.

Conclusions:

One of the founders of Straight was Ambassador Mel Sembler, and as a result of this, it appears that some members of HRS experienced some degree of pressure to grant Straight a license when otherwise the license may not have been granted. However, it cannot be unequivocally corroborated that this outside influence actually altered the decision to issue the license.

One of the issues raised by the complaint was the HRS licensing of straight. While the HRS district administrators were never ordered to issue a license to Straight, there were indications that outside influence was involved with this licensing issue. It appears that pressure may have been generated by Ambassador Sembler and other state senators.

End of document released by DCF, April 8, 2003

Conclusion:

- 1) HRS knew of the abuses at Straight, Inc. and licensed the program anyway. As a result of this discovery, ISAC believes the department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, now the Department of Children and Families, along with the State of Florida, to be responsible and liable for those abuses.
- 2) This document is evidence of the fact that Ambassador Mel Sembler used his political office in an effort to obtain state licensing for a treatment facility, which had been proven to be abusive – and was founded by Mel Sembler himself.
- 3) Ambassador Sembler ignored state regulations and warnings to stop abusing and neglecting children on more than one occasion.
- 4) Ambassador Mel Sembler was warned as early as 1978 regarding physical restraint and holding children against their will. (The Sembler Report, www.straightincorporated.com)
- 5) Ambassador Mel Sembler engaged in racketeering involving but not limited to the following: **1511 (obstruction of State or local law enforcement), 1512 (tampering with a witness, victim, or informant), and 1513 (retaliating against a witness, victim, or informant).**
- 6) It is evident that Ambassador Mel Sembler made more than one attempt to, and eventually succeeded in, obstructing justice.

ISAC demands the immediate investigation of Mel Sembler by the appropriate agencies in the State of Florida.

ISAC is requesting a hearing by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to demand the IMMEDIATE removal of Mel Sembler as Ambassador to Italy based on the volumes of evidence against him.

ISAC requests copies of all documents, including investigations, reports and correspondence - past, present or future - involving Mel Sembler.

Copies of this report have been sent to Florida Governor Jeb Bush, all state representatives, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and appropriate law enforcement officials.

A history of the involvement between current United States Ambassador Mel Sembler and Straight, Inc. can be obtained from www.isaccorp.org/documentsnz.html. (The Sembler Report)

This report includes Mel Sembler's repeated refusal to abide by state regulations as well as his refusal to adhere to warnings issued by the state of Florida.

You may also obtain a copy of the Tax Report which has been forwarded to the Internal Revenue Service to assist in its investigation of Straight, Inc. / Drug Free America Foundation for tax fraud from 1983 to the present. This document can be obtained from www.isacorp.org/documentsnz.html.

DCF has received a copy of these as well as all relevant documents.