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Treatment center's headquarters closing

By ANNMARIE SANSFIELD
Tribune Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — As quietly as Straight Inc. closed its drug treatment center three weeks ago, the St. Petersburg-based national headquarters quickly is following suit.

Bruce Epstein, a physician and member of Straight's board of directors, confirmed Thursday the national headquarters is closing.

Epstein, a medical adviser to Straight, said he learned of the pending shutdown from national Executive Director Bernadine Braithwaite. He said he didn't know any details of the closing or how it would affect other treatment centers still operating.

Straight officials and most

members of its board of directors did not return telephone calls. A woman who answered the telephone at Braithwaite's home said her mother was out of town.

Straight, which at one time had at least eight adolescent drug treatment centers in the United States, now has only two centers open.

Kathleen Cone, administrator for the center near Atlanta in Marietta, Ga., was unaware of any change in the status of the national headquarters. But she said from a treatment perspective, the closing "would have no impact" on her operation.

Cone said her center operates independently because it must

See STRAIGHT, Page 7

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Straight Inc. will close headquarters

■ From Page 1

maintain client records at the site and must follow state operating requirements.

Kathy Radgens, clinical director at the center near Detroit in Southfield, Mich., said she could not comment until she had more information.

The St. Petersburg treatment center and national headquarters office building, both at 3001 Gandy Blvd., are for sale.

Real estate broker Fred O'Callaghan said he will meet today with Straight executives to determine an asking price for the property. The property appraiser's office lists the value of the land and buildings as \$1,088,900.

The defunct St. Petersburg drug treatment program is being investigated by the state, according to a spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS). And it's being investigated by the FBI, according to a former client and parents of former clients who say they have been questioned by an agent about allegations of double and triple billing.

HRS would not provide details of the state investigation and the FBI as a matter of policy will not confirm or deny any possible investigations.

In an April 23 letter to HRS, Straight said it closed the St. Petersburg treatment center because there were only 16 clients. At one time, the facility had as many as 325 clients.

In the letter, Joy Margolis, vice president of public affairs for Straight, attributed the low number of clients to "the depressed economy and lack of financial resources of many families."

Ten of the clients were transferred to the Georgia center, Cone said.

Founded in 1976 by former U.S. Ambassador Mel Sembler, Straight has suffered from several costly lawsuits stemming from allegations of physical abuse.

Sembler's secretary said Thursday he would not return telephone calls about Straight.

Straight uses intensive peer pressure and a 12-step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous to rehabilitate drug users. Its unorthodox methods have been challenged by former clients and parents of former clients — many of whom formed a nationwide network against the organization.

In its heyday, the St. Petersburg center was visited by then-Vice President George Bush in 1987 and former first lady Nancy Reagan in 1982.

State investigating Straight Inc. drug program

■ The investigation of the controversial drug program is ongoing even though its St. Petersburg center closed over the weekend. Officials blamed that on the economy.

By CURTIS KRUEGER
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Straight Inc. was under investigation by the state before the controversial adolescent drug treatment program closed its St. Petersburg center this weekend.

Elaine Fulton Jones, spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, confirmed the ongoing investigation, but said she was barred from providing any details. She also said she knew of nothing to indicate the investigation had anything to do with the center's closing.

Richard Bradbury, a former Straight client who has become an activist against the organization, said he initiated an investigation by complaining to the governor's office.

Bradbury said he complained that an Orlando adolescent drug treatment center with ties to Straight had apparently been allowed to operate without insurance. He said he also had provided the names of former Straight clients who said the program had abused them.

Straight officials did not return phone calls Monday, but they issued a short news release blaming the closing on the economy.

Although the local center has been closed, Straight's national headquarters will remain in St. Petersburg. The organization faxed a letter late Friday to HRS to announce the closing.

Although regulations generally require a 30-day notice, there is no penalty imposed on an organization that must shut its doors on short notice, Fulton Jones said.

Fulton Jones said the 16 remaining clients and their families had been offered the option of transferring to a Straight facility near Atlanta. She said nine of them

accepted the offer, and one was being admitted to a different program. She said she was not sure about the others. The center had room for 100 clients.

Straight's letter to HRS blamed the closing on "the depressed economy and lack of financial resources of many families."

Pinellas court records indicate some other areas of financial concern:

■ An \$872,642 default judgment from California has been entered in Pinellas County courts against Straight Inc. The judgment was entered because Straight broke a lease for a building in Yorba Linda, Calif., said Charles Buchanan of Davis Partners in Newport Beach, Calif.

■ Straight has had to sue some former clients for nonpayment within the past year. In one case, Straight said a Gainesville woman owed \$14,251 for her daughter's treatment. She said she was bankrupt.

Straight closed its treatment center in a Washington, D.C., suburb last year. It blamed that closing on the recession, too. Virginia officials in 1991 announced plans not to renew the center's license there because Straight had allegedly failed to provide proper education for youths in the program, had improperly allowed clients to be physically restrained and had made mistakes in evaluating clients' problems, *The Washington Post* reported. The center then moved to Columbia, Md., before announcing plans to close last year.

PRO

Thursday, July 8, 1993

Straight chief twisted arms, report shows

Politically connected Mel Sembler had help from state senators to get a license renewed.

By ANNMARIE SANSFIELD
Tribune Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Former U.S. Ambassador Mel Sembler and unnamed state senators pressured a state agency into renewing Straight Inc.'s license despite a staff recommendation against it, an agency inspector general's report has found.

A seven-month investigation into the defunct St. Petersburg-based drug rehabilitation center, which Sembler founded, also revealed "a definite pattern of abuse or excessive force used against clients at Straight facilities." The probe stemmed from a complaint by Richard Bradbury, a former client and staff member.

The gossipy report — riddled with unsubstantiated allegations and innuendos — details various conversations in which a high-level state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) official told his staff to license Straight Inc. regardless of findings in an August 1989 inspection.

The licensing team was ready to recommend the license not be renewed, because Straight had not corrected a number of issues raised at an inspection three months earlier.

Harry Moffitt, an HRS senior human services program specialist, told investigators of threats to fire a staff member who questioned why Florida would allow Straight to continue operating in spite of allega-

tions of withholding medication and food from clients, depriving them of sleep and using excessive force against them. Similar problems forced closure of Straight treatment centers in other states.

Moffitt said when Linda Lewis, a former HRS deputy assistant secretary, brought that fact to the attention of Ivor Groves, he told her, "If you do anything other than what I tell you to do on this issue, I will fire you on the spot."

Groves, a former HRS assistant secretary, denied the conversation to an investigator, and Lewis didn't recall it, the report said. Groves, Lewis and Moffitt could not be reached Wednesday. Sembler and Bernadine Braithwaite, executive director of Straight, did not return telephone calls.

Straight, which once boasted treatment centers in 12 states, closed its St. Petersburg treatment center in April. The adjacent national headquarters closed in May.

Although the findings won't have much significance because Straight is closed, HRS spokeswoman Ellen Dadisman said Wednesday the investigation was completed "to determine if we could have done anything better."

Straight has been simultaneously lauded and lambasted. While the target of numerous lawsuits stemming from allegations of physical abuse and holding people against their will, Straight received kudos from Republican administrations in the 1980s.

Straight board members Sembler and Joseph Zappala headed state fund-raising efforts for George Bush's 1988 campaign. Each made a \$125,000 contribution to the Re-

See STRAIGHT, Page 5

(Indicate page, name of newspaper, city and state.)

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■ From Page 1

publican National Committee and were part of the RNC's Team 100 of major contributors. They were rewarded with ambassadorships to Australia and Spain, respectively.

The report says Sembler contacted then-HRS Secretary Gregory Coler several times concerning Straight. "It appears that Mr. Coler then called Dr. Groves about Straight," the report said.

HRS also received telephone calls from state senators, who let it be known they strongly supported the program, "thus exerting a certain influence concerning Straight matters," the report concluded. The senators were not named.

Two of Pinellas County's three state senators at the time, Mary Grizzle, R-Belleair Shore, and Jeanne Malchon, D-St. Petersburg, said they did not make the calls supporting Straight. Curt Kiser, R-Palm Harbor, said he doesn't remember, but it's very unlikely that he would have made such a call.

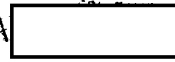
The HRS investigation also detailed physical abuse or neglect at Straight, including restraining clients who tried to escape or wouldn't sit straight in their chairs for as long as 12 hours; failing to provide follow-up medical treatment; and knowingly placing clients "in a dangerous situation."

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* TIMES ■ THURSDAY, JULY 8, 1993 **3B**

Audit says Straight Inc. got breaks

■ The state audit reveals pressure to renew the license of the controversial drug treatment center from several officials despite concerns about abuses.

By CURTIS KRUEGER
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — An audit has concluded that state officials renewed the license of controversial drug treatment center Straight Inc. because of pressure from state senators and one of the center's founders, former U.S. Ambassador Mel Sembler.

The state audit also says Florida's experience with Straight shows "there has been a propensity for abuse or excessive force to be used."

Straight was formed in St. Petersburg and attained nationwide publicity in the 1980s, but the organization has since pulled out of St. Petersburg and closed several centers around the country.

Straight has long been dogged by allegations that it was physically and mentally abusive to the adolescents who were checked into the program.

The audit, conducted by the inspector general office of HRS, was released Wednesday. It quotes HRS officials who said a senior HRS administrator, Ivor Groves, wanted Straight's license renewed, despite concerns such as "withholding medication, excessive use of force, withholding food, sleep deprivation, etc." Groves denied the allegations.

At the time of this debate, Sembler had been nominated but not confirmed as the U.S. ambassador to Australia. He also had been one of the founders of Straight. Because of that, the audit said, "it appears that some members of HRS experienced some degree of pressure to grant Straight a license."

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