

DRUG CENTER'S MODEL ALSO DREW FIRE

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- Author/Byline: By SALLY DENEEN, Staff Writer
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A Lake Worth drug treatment center now under fire by authorities is not the only program of its kind to be lambasted for restraint tactics and not allowing newcomers privacy.

The tactics at Growing Together Inc. were used at a controversial Orlando treatment program that prompted attention by 60 Minutes and the state.

"Any program undergoing this much press, this much scrutiny, this much investigation, I would not have my child there," said Rik Pavlescak, of the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.

Growing Together, now operating under an interim state license instead of a normal annual license, is modeled after the Life center in Sarasota. That center is modeled after Straight, Pavlescak said.

Straight operated on temporary licenses last year until problems were corrected.

"My understanding is they are all basically the same," Pavlescak said of the three centers.

All use peer pressure to kick teens from drugs. All make youngsters attend programs during the day and sleep in the homes of parents who have had children in the program.

The center is drawing attention because of the case of Dana, a 15-year-old Coral Springs girl whose parents committed her to the private non-profit center on Lucerne Avenue.

Dana now suffers "post-traumatic stress disorder," stemming from her 15 months in the program, according to a diagnosis from Coral Springs psychiatrist Stephen Moskowitz. Her sense of confidence was totally crushed, he said.

Because of her case, Circuit Judge Michael Gersten, who signed the order committing Dana for drug treatment, said on Thursday he no longer will order youths to that center. State officials also threaten to revoke its license unless problems are corrected by May 8.

Officials were alarmed by such issues as children being prohibited from talking to their families for about two months, children sleeping on floors in locked bedrooms, and youths not being told they can file grievances about the program.

Straight, founded 14 years ago in St. Petersburg, drew criticism for its restraint tactics and policy of allowing no privacy to newcomers, published reports show.

The storm of controversy died down last year and parents now are not complaining about Straight, said Syd McAllister, deputy district administrator for HRS in Orlando.

Growing Together Executive Director Barbara Griffith said she is confident her program will meet state standards by May.

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