

Ex-Straight leader files to helps kids

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The once controversial counselor, however, says he's not interested in working with a substance abuse program again.

Miller Newton, who once helped lead the highly controversial drug treatment program Straight Inc., applied earlier this year for the right to provide substance abuse counseling to youths referred by Pinellas County's Juvenile Assessment Center.

But Newton, a psychologist who also came under fire for his work at a center he managed in New Jersey, said Monday that he has no intention of getting back into substance abuse treatment of teenagers.

"I'm not involved in any high-profile, controversial kind of work anymore," Newton said. "I'm 61 years old next week, and I'm living a little quieter kind of life. I'm not really interested in directing a program or doing anything like that any more."

In the early 1980s, Newton served as national clinical director and in other posts for the St. Petersburg-based Straight Inc., which was repeatedly criticized and sued by former clients for alleged psychological and physical harassment.

He left the center in 1983 and later became president of Kids of North Jersey, which provided mental health services for youths. This agency was involved in controversies similar to the criticisms leveled at Straight.

A report filed earlier this year by New Jersey Assistant Attorney General Barbara Pryor Waugh said that in the Kids program youths often were prevented from contacting their parents; clients were restrained without proper authorization; clients were restrained by other clients; and staffing was insufficient.

The New Jersey program paid \$45,000 to the federal government in 1996 to settle a claim that Newton and the program improperly submitted 254 insurance claims. The program and Newton denied any wrongdoing. The Kids program closed last year.

Newton said he is working locally as a psychologist and worked briefly with another psychologist, Roma Schiefer, who has an office in Seminole.

Newton said he did not recall sending an application for referrals for substance abuse counseling in January to the Juvenile Assessment Center, which is where juveniles are evaluated after being picked up by police in Pinellas County.

But he said he could have because the office he worked with was sending out several such letters to build up clients.

An advisory board to the Juvenile Assessment Center reviewed his application and decided in June to table it until board members could learn more about Newton's work since his days with Straight.

The state Department of Children and Families sent Newton a letter this month saying he "cannot continue to operate without a (substance abuse) license," or without proving that he is exempt from needing one. But Miller said he is not working as a substance abuse counselor. He said he is properly licensed as a psychologist.

He said he works primarily in the area of neuropsychological assessments and is not doing any ongoing treatment of clients, except to finish with a few people he worked with at Schiefer's practice. He has otherwise quit Schiefer's practice, but she said the parting was a business decision and not based on any concern over his treatment methods.

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