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Straight Inc. directors **mull nationwide expansion**

By **KERRY SCHAFFER**
Journal Staff Writer

Directors of the St. Petersburg-based drug abuse program, Straight Inc., are seriously considering the advice of an expert to expand their program and to start a national training center.

Dr. Robert Dupont, founder of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, urged directors Friday to conduct their program on a national basis.

"We've already made the decision to expand," said Jim Hartz, executive director of Straight, Inc. "Sarasota is our first expansion and we've hired an executive staff for our program in Atlanta."

HARTZ SAID the Atlanta program should be ready to start by September. Directors also are considering expansion into two other areas, one in Florida and one in another state, he added.

As for Dupont's suggestion to start a national training center, Hartz said, "We're in the thinking and idea stage right now. We're looking at our options and timeframe."

Three things make Straight Inc. successful, Hartz said. The first is a good checks-and-balances system.

"We have an active board of directors and peers and professionals work as a team. A juvenile staff member can disagree with a Ph.D.," he said.

STRONG FAMILY INVOLVEMENT also

helps make the drug abuse program a success, Hartz said.

"Drug abuse is a feeling disease," the director said. "Families are now beginning to see they have to work together."

One important part of the family involvement is that the juveniles are allowed to stay home rather than living in other facilities, Hartz said.

"We think it's the strength of the facility. It also cuts down on the cost," he said.

THE THIRD FACTOR that makes the drug abuse program a success is that it's economical, Hartz said.

"We're affordable and we don't turn anyone away," he said.

Thirty percent of the program's budget comes from the community. Fees for services and fund-raising attempts supply the rest of the money, he said.

Since Straight Inc. was founded five years ago, 1,500 juveniles have gone through the program. About 50 percent of those treated have remained off drugs, Hartz explained. The Sarasota branch currently treats about 105 juveniles.

"We have a very good record in juvenile drug abuse," he said. "We do have a small number of recidivism. We're always working to make it better."

Juveniles complete the program in approximately a year, Hartz said. "Some complete it in six to eight months; others take about 18 months. We tell the family the average is one year," he said.