

DRUG-TREATMENT PROGRAM IS IN TROUBLE WITH STATE AGAIN

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Straight Inc., a drug treatment program for teen-agers, is in danger of losing its license as state health officials cite problems ranging from poorly kept client records to alleged abuse of restrained patients.

Now operating under a temporary license, the program has been scrutinized for allegations of mistreatment and mismanagement for a second time this year. Such allegations have plagued the private, non-profit program almost since its Orlando chapter started in 1985.

Straight officials say the latest citations are another attempt by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services to close the program because the agency disapproves of its methods.

The nationwide program, founded 13 years ago in St. Petersburg, uses confrontational rap sessions and peer-pressure therapy to try to free adolescents from drug dependency. In Central Florida, Straight operates the largest private residential drug treatment program, currently serving 73 patients in Orlando.

"Straight is a tough program and we'll be the first to tell you and the parents who come in that this is not for everybody. You have to have a commitment to get your child free of drugs," said program administrator Michael Scaletta. "Straight has been around a long time and had its share of controversy, but the fact remains that it works."

He cites as proof that 70 percent of the program's graduates remain drug-free for at least two years.

The state agency has no vendetta against the program, and has gone "the 12th mile" to help Straight meet state guidelines, said Paul Snead, who oversees the agency's Central Florida district. If Scaletta's claim were true, Snead said, the agency could have closed the operation long ago.

"There are kids in that program whose parents are at their last wits. I'm trying to do everything I can to keep that program afloat," Snead said. "It serves a purpose, but we've just had a litany of concerns about the program."

Following information from someone inside the organization, the HRS says that Straight:

- Kept incomplete records of clients' treatment plans, progress notes and psycho-social assessments, which are used by counselors.
- Failed to notify the HRS of incidents in which clients were, or could have been, harmed.
- Has no policy for dealing with clients who appear suicidal.
- Inappropriately used four-point restraints, in which four people pin a patient down to keep the patient from harming himself or herself or others. The staff did not first try to calm the patient before resorting to the restraints.

Straight's administrator says the allegations are too broad. "We say we have a policy that handles all types of issues. I say we're in compliance. I'm just so upset by this. It's harassment," Scaletta said.

The HRS will issue a more detailed report when it finishes investigating the program, said Ted Bogert, who monitors Straight for the Central Florida district.

"But all programs should be able to meet with the minimum requirements," Bogert said. "They have been consistently out of compliance, and the way their program model is, it just doesn't mesh with the state guidelines."

The temporary license expires Jan. 30. By then, Straight officials must have met guidelines or face disciplinary action. That could range from a ban on admitting new patients to forfeiture of the license, Snead said.

The program has been in this situation before. In 1989, the HRS issued a ban on admissions that has since been lifted.

Straight has lost lawsuits filed by former clients in Virginia, Cincinnati and St. Petersburg. Straight shut its Cincinnati program in 1988.

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