

DRUG PROJECT TACTICS GET RESULTS, COMPLAINTS

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They crowded into the carpet room, so named for the colorful checkerboard fabric covering the concrete floor. About 75 mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters chatted, sipped coffee and nibbled Danishes.

In the next room, behind closed doors, were 100 other family members, all teen-agers with drug problems, all of them singing a cappella to the tune of the Helen Reddy song "I Am Woman." But the words had been changed: Oh, yes, I am wise, but it's wisdom borne of pain.

The doors opened, and those in the carpet room joined in the singing as they filed into rows of folding chairs to face the teen-agers who sat in neat rows at one end of the room. As the room filled up, they sang together.

I am strong. I am invincible. . . . I am STRAAAIGHT.

It was family night at Orlando's Straight Inc., one of eight chapters of the national drug-treatment program.

Using techniques that critics liken to brainwashing, the program has been controversial since it was founded 13 years ago in St. Petersburg. Now, state officials are focusing on whether Straight recently has used excessive physical force against clients in Orlando under the guise of therapy.

Investigators with the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services have questioned at least four teen-agers treated in the program and some of their parents about allegations of abuse. District administrator Paul Snead would not comment on the abuse investigation, except to say it was ongoing.

In a June inspection report, HRS investigators called "potentially disastrous" Straight's method of restraining clients. It involves four or more clients subduing a single client by pinning each arm and leg to the floor, purportedly to keep them from hurting themselves or others.

The report also pointed out a concern for the privacy of Straight clients who are subjected to "beltlooping," which involves leading new members around by the belt loops on their pants and allowing them no privacy to shower or use the bathroom.

"Clients should be allowed to shower and toilet in privacy," the report stated.

Ron Markham, a building superintendent at Straight, told The Orlando Sentinel that he has seen the restraint technique used to punish clients who weren't violent. He and six former clients, including some whom state investigators have questioned, described therapy sessions that included physical and psychological abuse.

"The kids are scared to talk or complain. The parents are in the dark," said Markham, who has worked for a year at Straight's converted warehouse on Silver Star Road.

Markham also said he saw a girl held down as water was allowed to drip on her face like "water torture."

In another case, a girl was held while her hair was cut short, he said. "They said her hair was 'imagey,'" he said.

Last week, HRS revised a rule to outlaw the restraint of clients by anyone other than trained staff members at state-licensed facilities. The change was a year in the works and was not the result of any charges against Straight, HRS spokesman John Matthews said in Tallahassee.

The change means that Straight will have to hire more staff, Orlando Straight director Michael Scaletta said. "We will comply," he said.

Straight has been controversial for its tough tactics and will continue to be so, Scaletta said.

"Straight is not for everyone," Scaletta said. "One of the guarantees of Straight is that we will offer a drug-free environment. We do not use medication. Straight has been considered the Marine Corps for drug treatment. . . . We are very tough when it comes to fighting this war on drugs."

Some of the charges against his chapter are from people who are taking incidents out of context and exaggerating them, he said. Scaletta said of the water incident, "That's not true. . . . I resent him saying that."

On the haircutting, "She obviously didn't want her hair cut. Given the circumstances, things would not be done differently. I don't want to get into the circumstances."

After a routine inspection this spring, HRS cited the Orlando and St. Petersburg chapters for violations of state rules, including insufficient training of staff and incomplete records about employee backgrounds. Instead of renewing the programs' licenses for a year, the agency has given them temporary three-month licenses that will expire next month. The licensing citations are not connected with the investigation into charges of abuse, Snead said.

Straight officials said they expect no problem correcting the violations. Last week, HRS investigators inspected the Orlando program to check on the progress.

Scaletta said Straight and HRS have a "basic philosophical difference."

Straight policy calls for using the four-point restraint only as a last resort to protect clients from hurting themselves or others.

According to the policy, restraint should be used only on clients who are "exhibiting behavior which could result in harm to themselves or others." Restraint "shall not be employed as punishment or for the convenience of staff and shall not be applied in a manner that causes undue physical discomfort or pain for the client."

But former clients said the policy is frequently violated.

Carrie ██████, 18, said she was once pinned to the ground by other clients for 90 minutes for talking out of turn.

"My arms and legs were white and purple," said Carrie, who was in the Straight program for 16 months. "If you misbehave, they'll do everything in their power to make you feel like crap and make you feel bad inwardly - so that you hit what they call your bottom."

Rob ██████, 16, of Orlando, was enrolled in Straight last fall by his sister. Rob's life was a mess. Both his parents were dead, and drugs filled the void. He said he drank heavily, smoked crack and ran from the law.

Big for his age at more than 200 pounds, Rob said he was often called upon to help restrain other children.

"There's a lot of spite that goes on," he said. "I was restrained once and ended up with a black eye." Former client tells of slamming children

Rob said he inflicted his share of punishment, too, slamming children to the floor and hitting them on the way down. He said it was encouraged by staff workers, most of whom were young adults who had graduated from the program.

He remembers a boy needing stitches after getting punched in the mouth during a restraint.

Both Carrie and Rob said they no longer use drugs.

Straight's drug-treatment philosophy centers on a five-phased approach: The young drug abuser must earn his way up through the fifth phase before graduation from the program. Each phase has a minimum treatment period from seven to 90 days.

According to Straight literature, the program usually takes about a year and costs about \$10,000.

In the first phase, newcomers have no rights. That phase includes the beltlooping technique and confrontational rap sessions seven days a week that encourage clients to be honest about their drug use.

Phase-one clients spend the night at the home of a Straight parent whose child is usually in a more advanced phase of the program. The client is never left alone and is not allowed to read, go to school, make telephone calls, listen to the radio or watch television. Although not locked up, the child, if younger than 18, cannot leave.

Clients advance to the next phase if it appears that they are "working the program." With each subsequent phase, a client receives more rights until finally he or she is allowed to re-enter society. With each higher phase, more freedom is allowed and less time at Straight is required.

One 15-year-old Orlando girl, who would speak only if her name were not used, was in the program for five months before her mother pulled her out. Teen says she didn't like restraining people

The girl said she had a green belt in karate when she entered Straight. "I was made to restrain people. It was my 'oldcomer' responsibility," she said. "I was hit and kicked and spit on, and I don't like violence. Karate was taught to me as self-defense. I hate violence. I hated doing it. I was made to do it because I was bigger and stronger."

The girl said people were sometimes restrained for refusing to sit up in their chairs, or if they talked out of turn.

"They'd pick a person out and poke him in the back to make him sit up so much that it would cause a fight," she said. "They'd try to start a fight with you."

The girl's mother said her daughter was not allowed to talk about restraints or any part of the program. Such conversation could result in being bumped back to the first phase.

"The parents are instructed not to ask questions about what happened to their child," she said. "If you do that, you are labeled as co-dependent" - interfering with the child's treatment.

When the girl came home with bruises one night, her mother demanded that her daughter tell her what was going on.

The final straw was when she learned how her daughter had been punished one day.

The girl explained what happened: "The rap was, 'Who is garbage today?' They put garbage on a rap stool next to me. I was crying. They handed me a piece of garbage and said, 'Here is your Academy Award.' " Mom didn't like daughter's answers

Her mother said, "I don't see how that is therapeutic."

Scaletta said there was, indeed, a rap session titled "Who is garbage." But garbage was not used, just wadded up papers.

Scaletta said, "We have disgruntled people, and we are going to have that. People get disgruntled and take things so far out of context."

Straight Inc. has fought controversy before from those outraged by its tough tactics. A federal appeals court in Virginia upheld a decision awarding \$220,000 in damages to a young man who sued for false imprisonment after he was held against his will at the St. Petersburg center for 130 days before escaping during a closely monitored visit to his parents' house in Virginia.

A flurry of lawsuits have been filed in Cincinnati. Two suits there have been settled out of court for undisclosed sums, said attorney David Scacchetti, who filed them on behalf of several former clients. Two more are pending, he said.

"The thrust of the suits was that there was inadequate supervision, kids were running the program, that there was not a proper therapeutic plan," Scacchetti said.

Straight shut down its Cincinnati program last year.

In the past, the controversy has often been drowned out by the resounding songs of praise from parents whose children have been cured of drug addiction. Straight claims to be the most successful drug-treatment program in the nation.

President Bush has been among those to praise the program. He has nominated its founder, Pinellas County developer Mel Sembler, to be ambassador to Australia.

Like many addiction-treatment programs, Straight uses the "12 Steps to Sobriety" prayer, developed by Alcoholics Anonymous, as its program's building blocks.

Many of the program's critics, including several of the teen-agers who have leveled abuse reports, believe that aspects of the program are good.

"I think Straight could be a good program," said Roxane Beck, who pulled two daughters out of the Orlando program. "It just seemed like there were some power plays going on. . . . I didn't put my kids in treatment so they could hold people down and get hurt."

Orlando Straight administrator Michelle Spisak said she will agree with one critique: The teen-agers aren't necessarily happy in the program. "It's a lot easier to be in jail," she said. "Many kids choose that route."

- **Caption:** BOX: (Text of report) The program's policy on restraint is potentially disastrous, both from a liability and client's rights stand point, with the possibility of serious injury when clients are encouraged and/or allowed to physically restrain other clients.
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