

ORLANDO DRUG PROGRAM HAS 4 DAYS LEFT TO STRAIGHTEN UP

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Straight Inc., a drug treatment program in Orlando, has until Wednesday to submit a revised policy on the way it restrains clients that meets state approval.

The program's temporary license expires Thursday.

In a letter last week to the program's director, a Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services official said Straight "policies and practices" do not comply with the agency's rules.

The restraint policy "must be brought into compliance before a license can be issued," HRS district program supervisor Stanley Wagy wrote in the Aug. 24 letter.

Founded 13 years ago in St. Petersburg, Straight is now a nationwide drug treatment program that attempts to free adolescents from drug dependency through peer pressure therapy. Confrontational marathon "rap" sessions are daily rituals, and new clients are kept overnight in the homes of Straight parents who've had children in the program.

Critics have attacked the program for its tactics - such as the restraint method and a no-privacy policy for newcomers - which have been compared with brainwashing techniques.

Straight has used a method of restraint in which four clients pin another client to the floor. The organization says the restraint is used to keep an unruly client from hurting himself or others.

In a June inspection report, HRS called the method "potentially disastrous" and then earlier this month outlawed the practice at all state-licensed facilities by anyone other than trained adult staff members.

Because of a variety of infractions found during the inspection, HRS gave Straight a temporary three-month license instead of one for the full year.

Orlando Straight director Michael Scaletta said the program will submit a revised restraining policy to HRS and is optimistic it will be accepted.

"It's a matter of semantics right now," Scaletta said. "We are going to comply."

HRS district administrator Paul Snead would not comment on what the agency would do if Straight does not submit an acceptable policy. "Let's wait and see," what happens next week, Snead said.

Snead said Straight had submitted a new policy earlier in response to HRS requests, but the policy was "unsatisfactory" because it did not specifically detail that clients would be restrained only by trained staff.

Straight's St. Petersburg chapter also is operating with a temporary license that expires Sept. 6. A similar request for a restraint policy was being drafted Friday for the St. Petersburg chapter, said Elaine Fulton-Jones of HRS.

Since the beginning of this year, several teen-agers who were former clients and a former employee of the Orlando Straight program have been interviewed by an HRS abuse investigator about allegations that clients were physically and psychologically abused in the program.

Ron Markham, a maintenance man at Straight, said he was fired last week because he was quoted in The Orlando Sentinel criticizing the program. Markham said in an Aug. 13 article that he had seen teen-agers, who were not violent, pinned to the ground by other clients.

Scaletta said Markham was fired because he "couldn't do the job." Markham has not been at work for several weeks because of a back problem and is unable to work, he said.

Markham said he asked Scaletta for a written reason for his termination and was told, "to cut out the Sentinel article and bring that down to the unemployment office."

"You can't believe everything Markham says," Scaletta said when asked whether he made the comment.

Markham has been sent a written explanation, and the dismissal was not because of the article, Scaletta said.

While working at Straight, Markham said he saw a teen-age girl held down while her hair was cut against her will. He said he also saw a girl held down while water was allowed to drip onto her like "water torture."

The Sentinel interviewed six former clients and two parents of clients who criticized the program's restraint policies as abusive.

Scaletta said he did not know what will happen if HRS does not accept the program's policy this time.

"If they don't like what we say, and Straight takes a position, then I guess the courts will have to decide," he said.

Wagy's letter to Straight also stated that the policy must "ensure that clients are aware of their rights to report abuse and have access to a telephone 24 hours a day."

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