

ORLANDO'S STRAIGHT INC. READIES ANTI-DRUG EFFORT

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With the kinks worked out of its once-controversial treatment program, Straight Inc. now is set to help Orlando area youths get off drugs.

The non-profit organization will formally open its new Orlando treatment center in October, although it already is counseling 65 people, ages 12 to 21.

Started in St. Petersburg nine years ago, Straight also operates programs in Atlanta, Cincinnati, Detroit and Springfield, Va. The organization has been in Orlando since March, offering information on drug and alcohol abuse to parents, teachers and school counselors.

Joel Jones, Straight executive director in Orlando, said he expects the drug treatment program to have up to 125 youths a year.

"We're seeing more children and families coming for help because of things done by state and local officials to educate the family about the problem," said Jones, a retired Army colonel whose two children graduated from the St. Petersburg program.

Straight also is seeing younger children coming for treatment. Four years ago, the average patient was 15 to 16 years old. Now they're 11 to 13, Jones said.

He blamed the easy availability of drugs and media's role in glamorizing alcohol and intoxication for the growing epidemic of substance abuse among the young.

It takes about 11 months to get a youth off drugs in the Straight program, Jones said. Based on Alcoholics Anonymous, the program includes intensive counseling by trained therapists and confrontational sessions with peers and parents.

About 62 percent of the kids are drug-free during the first year off the program, Jones said. Drug counselors and local officials consider a 35 percent to 40 percent success rate good, he said.

Straight requires that parents attend counseling so that they are better able to help their children stay off drugs, Jones said. Family treatment is responsible for Straight's high success rate, he said.

For youths living within two hours of Orlando, the program costs \$3,500. It's \$5,500 for those living farther away.

The fees cover 60 percent of running the program from its recently renovated building at 2400 Silver Star Road in northwest Orlando. The rest is raised through donations from past participants, corporations and individuals, Jones said.

The nationally recognized program came under heavy criticism for its tough, confrontational counseling sessions in 1981, when some participants claimed they were forced to stay in the program against their will.

After evidence of client abuse was uncovered during investigations of the St. Petersburg and Sarasota branches, Straight signed an agreement with the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Service giving clients the right to withdraw from the program at any time. It also closed the Sarasota facility.

HRS, which licenses and monitors drug treatment programs in the state, has not found any problems in Straight's Orlando facility, said Stan Wagyl, who supervises the agency's local drug and alcohol treatment section.

Taylor [REDACTED], an 18-year-old drug addict enrolled in Straight's program, said the program is successful precisely because of its toughness.

"HRS has made it easier for people to come into the program and sit on their butts doing nothing," said [REDACTED], a veteran of three former drug treatment programs.

- Caption: PHOTO: Taylor [REDACTED] (right) at Orlando center . . . recovered teen stands with parents Frank and Sharon [REDACTED] JUDY BAYERL SENTINEL PHOTO: Joel Jones

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