

DRUG TREATMENT CENTER IS SUING TO STAY OPEN - SAFE'S LAWSUIT SAYS STATE REGULATORS HAVE BEEN HARASSING STAFFERS AND TEEN-AGE - CLIENTS.

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An Orlando drug treatment center sued Thursday to keep its doors open and stop the state regulators it accuses of harassing staff members and teen-age clients.

Substance Abuse Family Education (SAFE) says regulators have frightened and intimidated teens in the for-profit treatment center and bad-mouthed its therapy programs and its staff.

Program officials said the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services is looking for examples of abuses it could use to shut down the 1 1/2 -year-old program. SAFE serves about 40 patients from its offices at 4563 S. Orange Blossom Trail.

HRS attorney Jim Sawyer said the agency will investigate the accusations but has no plans to shut down the program.

The program's executive director, Loretta Parrish, claims the state agency is biased against SAFE because SAFE is an outgrowth of an embattled program called Straight Inc. Accusations of physical abuse and illegal imprisonment dogged Straight, which closed in 1992.

SAFE modified the Straight program to eliminate questionable practices, Parrish said. Patients still must meet strict behavior standards and endure intensive treatment sessions, but love and support have replaced discipline, Parrish said.

Patients, who usually are enrolled by parents, attend the daytime program and remain with host families or their own families at night, she said.

Sawyer said HRS harbors no bias against SAFE.

"This is a new game out there - new policies, new staff," he said. "It's a new day. We are willing and eager to recognize that."

Parrish said the troubles stem from child abuse investigators who were called to investigate abuse complaints, many of which have been filed by patients. Parrish said she knows of none that have been verified.

Sawyer said recent regulatory troubles have focused mostly on complaints that patients physically restrain each other during fights or when someone tries to leave the program.

HRS and SAFE are working to resolve those problems, officials said. Parrish said patients are allowed to leave at any time.

The lawsuit, filed in Orange Circuit Court, asks a judge to stop harassment by the agency. A hearing is set for Feb. 3. Orlando attorney Paul Newnum said he later will sue for money because patients have suffered mental injuries.

The suit says HRS workers have suggested that one of the patients did not need SAFE and that program officials did not provide proper health care. It says they urged a patient to lie to progress in the minimum eight-month, \$15,000 program.

At a news conference, three sets of parents and a former patient praised SAFE and said it had saved their families.

"I'm shaking to think this program could be shut down," said Pamela ██████████ of New Smyrna Beach, whose 16-year-old son is in his eighth month of treatment. "It saved our son's life."

"We had a child basically at death's bed. Today we have a child who is an active participant in the community. He's in school. He's got goals."

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