

## NICE AND FRIENDLY DEAL ENDS SAFE'S LAWSUIT AGAINST HRS

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It was an easy way to end a lawsuit: One side simply agreed to be nice.

In an unusual court settlement, the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services signed legal papers Monday agreeing to be courteous and respectful toward Substance Abuse Family Education (SAFE), an Orlando for-profit drug treatment center.

The paperwork essentially ends SAFE's state Circuit Court suit accusing HRS of harassing staff members and teen-age clients. SAFE said the state agency, which monitors the facility, frightened and intimidated the center's teens and bad-mouthed therapy programs and staff.

HRS attorney Jim Sawyer said employees did nothing of the sort, but HRS agreed to sign the friendship pact to foster better relations with SAFE.

"This was a get-out-of-our-face kind of lawsuit, and we said, 'We don't want to be in your face.' Basically, we really both want to get along."

HRS didn't admit wrongdoing in the settlement, but SAFE backers are reading between the lines.

"I believe . . . a determination was made at HRS that they had a problem and needed to get that problem resolved," said SAFE's Orlando lawyer, Paul Newnum.

SAFE sued in January to keep its doors open. Executive Director Loretta Parrish thought regulators were looking for examples of abuses to justify closing the 1 1/2 -year-old program. Child-abuse investigators had been at the center to look into abuse complaints, many of which were filed by patients. Parrish said she knows of none that has been verified.

HRS denies having any plans to close SAFE. But Parrish thinks HRS 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. HRS denies any bias.

Parrish said SAFE modified the Straight program to eliminate questionable practices. Patients, who attend the daytime program and remain with host families or their own families at night, still must meet strict behavior standards and endure intensive treatment sessions. But love and support replaced discipline, Parrish said.

The SAFE lawsuit said HRS workers once suggested that a patient didn't need SAFE and that SAFE did not provide proper health care. The suit said HRS urged another patient to lie to progress in the minimum eight-month, \$15,000 program.

The settlement prohibits HRS from making such suggestions in the future and says HRS investigators who dealt with Straight can't deal with SAFE.

It also lets SAFE officials meet with HRS leadership if the agency tries to shut down the center or temporarily stop it from taking new clients.

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