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Rehabilitation centers to open, other programs planned

Help on the way for local youths with drug problems

By MARK ZALOUDEK
Journal Staff Writer

The adolescent drug problem is serious enough locally that Sarasota's first two rehabilitation centers plan to open their doors this summer.

Each facility is expected to serve eventually at least 200 adolescents.

There are other innovations being

planned for Sarasota and Venice as well. From parent rap lines to community support groups, the message is loud and clear that help is on the way.

One of the proposed rehab centers will be a branch of St. Petersburg's Straight Inc., an initially controversial program which began in 1976. It currently serves an

estimated 80 youths from Sarasota and Venice among its 280 clients. The other facility will be a locally-developed program with several members of the Sarasota County Drug Abuse Task Force sitting as its board of directors.

A third facility, the Palmer Drug Abuse Program in Houston, is reportedly seeking to open a branch

in Fort Myers in coming months, too, as drug rehabilitation comes of age.

Straight expects to open Aug. 1 at a yet-undetermined site, according to executive director Jim Hartz. He said Sarasota's approach will duplicate the St. Petersburg program, and an assistant director and other trained staff members are

currently being sought.

George Ross, a former assistant director of Straight, will spearhead the other local program called Life Is For Everyone, or LIFE. Ross holds a doctorate in education from the University of South Florida and has a wide range of experience in counseling.

Ross' program has been licensed

as part of the Southwest Florida Drug Rehabilitation and Counseling Center Inc. and will open on before July 1

Straight and LIFE will be similar in many respects. Both are designed to free adolescents from drug and alcohol use and provide them with the mental and social skills to keep

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Drug help

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them drug-free.

Their approach is rigorous and treatment averages six months to one year, with the child withdrawn from school during certain phases. Also, newcomers are not allowed to return home and are required to stay with the family of one of the more advanced students until they show progress. The end result is a child breaks almost all of his ties, including family and friends, until he makes major strides in his progress. At that time he is reunited with his family and school.

The cost of each program varies according to the parents' income.

Straight will charge a maximum of \$1,700 for the length of the program and LIFE costs up to \$2,000. Neither program will turn away indigent families, however, and rely on contributions to keep their fees low.

Straight inherited much of the controversy surrounding its predecessor, The Seed. Straight borrowed some of the framework of The Seed but added its own family component and behavioral therapy to help students regain control of their lives.

LIFE will go one step further in incorporating behavioral therapy to force students to challenge some of the erroneous assumptions on which they are basing their decisions.

Another difference between the two programs is LIFE will be locally controlled with no state or federal funding, "which gives the community a vote on our existence," said Ross.

"Working with teen-age substance abuse is a pioneering

area," he added, noting that adolescent drug abuse was not perceived as widespread as recently as 1964 when less than 2 percent of the U.S. population had experimented with marijuana.

In fact, the oldest drug rehabilitation program in the nation didn't begin until 1968 in New York City. In the short time since, however, LIFE has become the fourth generation of adolescent drug rehabilitation programs, Ross noted.

According to Ross, by the time former drug abusers graduate they learn to 1) be honest with themselves, 2) develop meaningful family relations, 3) develop educational and occupational goals, 4) creatively use their leisure time and 5) share of themselves and give to others.

Ross predicts 85 percent of the graduates will stay off drugs. Because of the intense nature of the program, however, and parents being separated from their children during the initial stages, there is a high drop-out rate. In the past, only three or four of every 10 children enrolled will complete the program.

Persons seeking more information can call Ross at 366-3282 or Hartz at 1-384-9696.

PREVENTION, NOT CURES, IS KEY

Most people believe the emphasis should be placed on eliminating the problem rather than providing the cures. To this end, other programs on the drawing board aim to nip adolescent drug abuse in the bud.

Parents who are confused and misinformed when it comes to drug abuse, not knowing what they can do about it, will find

help is just around the corner.

The first meeting of Families Anonymous begins tonight, where parents can get together, for free, at weekly meetings and discuss their concerns without revealing their names. Family counselor Linda Sherr hopes to bring a chapter of the nationally successful self-help group to Sarasota.

Interested parents are meeting at 7:30 p.m. at Storefront, 331 S. Pineapple, to launch the project.

Other means of prevention include parent programs springing up at local schools, a drug abuse specialist coming to town next week and filmstrips to make parents more aware of the problem.

Sarasota Junior High and Pine View School parents are not willing to take a back seat to the problem, and have begun organizing parents at their schools to unite against drugs. They plan to incorporate graphic films of youths using drugs to promote greater awareness.

A team cluster approach of parents, school officials and students at Sarasota Junior High, Sarasota High, Venice Junior High and Venice High schools may also be implemented if federal funding is granted.

DRUG EXPERT TO VISIT

Barbara Johnson, a certified drug counselor from Illinois and a national figure in activating parents, will speak to the public next week. Ms. Johnson will talk about "What Schools and Parents Can Do About Drug Abuse" at 7:30 p.m. Thurs., May 15, in room E-1 of Brookside Junior High School.

If all of the prevention programs seem to be geared for

parents, take heart. The school board has applied for \$1 million in federal funds to try to prevent high-risk junior high school students from becoming drop-outs and law breakers. The board has also placed a law officer on two campuses as an experimental program and has ordered the school drug education program to redirect its focus.

While funding for the junior high school pilot program is uncertain, campus security is expected to tighten up, particularly for drug and alcohol users, at McIntosh Junior High and Riverview High with the on-campus cop.

And with stronger emphasis on the elementary grades in the district-wide drug education program, one of Sarasota's "sacred cows" of drug prevention may get some needed change.

Director Julian Meade sees no sweeping changes for this year and rests on the program's national acceptance, despite serious questions raised about the program's effectiveness from the students and parents contacted.

David Rothel, the program's creator, admits it may be time to re-make the classroom videotapes with new student actors.

Students have criticized that some of the original actors filmed were on drugs, and, true, or false, students passed this along in their classrooms from year to year.

Nothing could make today's parents happier than to see the elimination of all of the drug rehab programs because they are no longer needed. But they are patient, recognizing that change takes place with time.