

# Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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## Englewood

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Section B

# Drug Program Gets List Of Corrections

By MARK ZALOUDEK  
Herald-Tribune Reporter

**Straight Inc.**, a drug abuse treatment program for teenagers, has been handed a detailed 13-item list of corrective actions by the state following repeated complaints by clients of mistreatment.

The corrective measures culminate a year-long investigation by Sarasota State Attorney James Gardner. Earlier this month, Gardner turned over sworn testimony of more than 50 persons to the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services; HRS officials in turn determined 27 "major" complaints.

Straight Executive Director Bill Oliver said he agrees in principle with all of the recommendations made by HRS, but will question some of the specific proposals when he meets with HRS officials in coming weeks.

"I don't anticipate there will be a final resolution this week. What we'll do is set a date this week where we can sit down and discuss them later," Oliver told the *Herald-Tribune*, adding that he expects the drug abuse program will reach an agreement with its state licensing agency by mid-May.

Some of the frequent complaints leveled against

- Develop a policy on reporting and investigating abuse complaints following a training session on state regulations with HRS;

- Prohibit the withholding of food and medical care as a means of punishment;

- Provide personal privacy to teens when using the bathroom and to allow them to use toilet facilities when needed;

- Arrange a private face-to-face meeting for all clients with their parents within three months of their enrollment;

- Develop a procedure for documenting all withdrawal requests and notify HRS within two hours of each request. "**Straight Inc.** shall release any voluntarily committed client within 24 hours of his or her initial request to withdraw from the program. If the client requesting to withdraw is under 18 years of age, Straight Inc., must release the client to the custody of his or her parents, legal guardian or HRS within 24 hours of receipt of the initial request;

- Post four placards with the name and phone number of HRS at readily observable locations and allow clients to phone HRS privately at any time;

- Inspect all foster homes within 60 days and annually thereafter for health and safety standards;

- Ensure that all foster homes are free of obvious fire hazards and communicable diseases.

Oliver said he's not sure what would be accomplished by allowing teens and their parents a private conversation within three months after the child is enrolled.

He also said he will discuss with HRS officials the item on automatic release of clients within 24 hours. "We would want to have a family conference and in some cases those parents (live) out of town," he said.

"But we have no problem with a time limit," suggesting 48 or 72 hours may be a more appropriate release time.

He also questioned the necessity of HRS placards posted in the rehabilitation facility, since other programs licensed by HRS presumably don't have to display them.

Constantine's letter from HRS listed all 27 "major complaints" contained in the State Attorney's file. It cited:

- Clients admitted with the understanding they could be released from the program after 14 days (as testified by nine clients, four staff members and two parents);

- Admission of clients who were totally uninvolved or only marginally involved in drug abuse (six clients, four staff members and three parents);

- Not being allowed to leave the program or

May.

Some of the frequent complaints leveled against the 2½-year-old Sarasota program are: Teenagers being signed up against their will or under false pretenses and later prohibited from leaving; physical abuse; denial of food, water and sleep for extended periods of time; and lack of privacy when bathing or using the toilet.

HRS District VII Administrator Robert Constantine has notified the local branch of the St. Petersburg-based rehabilitation program to:

- Adopt a simple form outlining each teenager's rights before he or she enters the program, including the notice: "You have the right to leave at any time during this intake (screening)" and, "You cannot be required to stay in the program unless you voluntarily agree to stay;"

- Develop a policy outlining use of physical restraint only when necessary to prevent youths from harming themselves or others;

- Develop a policy on use of a time-out room. "Each use of a time-out room shall be documented stating the reason, the client involved, the time the client went in and was removed, and the name of the staff member who authorized and supervised the incident;

- Ensure that all foster homes are free of obvious fire hazards and communicable diseases, provide balanced and palatable meals, provide separate beds or cots for each client in foster care and afford all clients privacy when using the bathroom;

- Provide adult supervision of all group meetings;

- Arrange educational exemptions with the Sarasota County School Board.

Although the corrective actions were mailed April 7 by certified mail, Oliver said Tuesday the HRS memorandum was "premature to address because that's what we're studying right now."

Oliver said many of the proposed policies already appear on the agency's books and where they don't, he sees no problem in adding them.

He said he had difficulty obeying a couple of specific guidelines, however. Teenagers can use the bathroom within reason but must be granted permission, he said, and their privacy will be respected although they won't be allowed to use the bathroom alone. He suggested a staff member's back may be turned while a student uses the toilet. "What we don't do is leave a kid in the bathroom by himself," he insisted.

(six clients, four staff members and three parents);

- Not being allowed to leave the program or personally contact authorities (six clients, three staff);

- Lack of reasonable privacy (all clients);

- Being locked in at foster homes, preventing easy exit in case of fire (11 clients, four staff members and three parents);

- Threats of clients being punished if they said negative comments to HRS staff during site visits (two clients);

- And threats to staff if they wanted to quit (two staff members).

Hugh Burns was director of the program for 1½ years before he was fired in December and replaced by acting director Christopher Yarnold. Straight Clinical Director Miller Newton has been quoted as blaming Burns for the problems, but local parents familiar with the program say some of the problems continue.

Straight's Oliver said, "I don't think you can blame any single person for the allegations that are made in the HRS report," he said.

Oliver promised to have adequate safeguards in place and monitored for their effectiveness within 90 days.