

# Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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## Englewood

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Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Section B

### Drug-Treatment Center Suspends Area Operation

By MARK ZALOUDEK  
Herald-Tribune Reporter

Struggling in a quicksand bog of problems, officials of Straight Inc. announced Tuesday they are indefinitely suspending operations of their Sarasota-Manatee branch.

All 47 clients, ages 14-22, enrolled in the drug-rehabilitation program will continue to receive therapy at Straight's St. Petersburg facility. In announcing the temporary withdrawal, Executive Director Bill Oliver called for an investigation by the inspector general of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) into the three-month process to resolve controversial issues surrounding the program.

"It tears my heart out because it's the suspension of a dream of a lot of people in the Sarasota area," Oliver said of Straight's first major setback in seven years of growth.

"I didn't say it was the end of the dream," he added.

In addition to St. Petersburg and Sarasota, Straight operates centers in Atlanta, Cincinnati and Alexandria, Va. Oliver said the group will continue paying rent on the Sarasota facility in the hope they can "return to this community when the environment is right."

The 3-year-old local branch ran into trouble last year when growing numbers of parents expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment program's methods. Their complaints coincided with an investigation by 12th District State Attorney James A. Gardner, who gathered sworn testimony from teenage clients and their parents charging imprisonment, physical abuse and health and safety hazards.

Gardner turned over his investigation to the regional HRS office, seeking enforcement of applicable state laws since HRS licenses and oversees Straight's operations.

HRS District VIII Administrator Robert Constantine said

### Suspends

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Since it opened Nov. 2, 1980, Sarasota's Straight has graduated 165 youths.

Straight is regarded by some drug-abuse experts as one of the most successful treatment programs in the nation, a distinction that helped it catch the attention of first lady Nancy Reagan, who visited the St. Petersburg facility last year.

But recently Straight has had its share of problems, too. A federal jury awarded a former client \$220,000 after he proved the St. Petersburg and Alexandria facilities held him against his will. Although Straight had been sued many times before, it was the first defeat the controversial program suffered.

Oliver predicts adolescent drug abuse is going to be one of the "key issues" of the 1980s and the barbs thrown at the program are far from over. "We're seeing kids as early as 10 and 11 years old who have used everything from glue to pot to hashish to amphetamines. . . ."

Gardner said his next step is to determine whether to file criminal charges against the program based on the testimony he has received alleging violation of personal rights. He may decide against it since the program is withdrawing from his 12th Judicial Circuit jurisdiction of Sarasota, Manatee and DeSoto counties.

If he decides not to press charges, Gardner promised to release his previously confidential, 300-page transcript of testimony taken from more than 50 former clients, parents and staff members to the press.

"No one outside of my office or HRS knows why I was so concerned," Gardner said.

licenses and oversees Straight's operations.

HRS District VIII Administrator Robert Constantine and Oliver have worked from April to July to resolve the major issues, resulting in Straight receiving a temporary license June 20. Both sides subsequently learned of Gardner's dissatisfaction with the final agreement.

Observed Oliver, "We understand the duty and responsibility of the state attorney and HRS to license and review, and we welcome that. Our position has always been that of cooperation. It seems, however, that no matter how much we do or how much we cooperate we cannot resolve the issues to their satisfaction."

"I'm not delighted or happy they're not going to be operating in this county, much like I would feel about a hospital leaving." Gardner told the *Herald-Tribune* while repeating his concern for a law-abiding clinic. "All you have to do is take our Florida statutes and administrative code and you are welcome to operate in Sarasota County. That's my only job, to see they follow the law."

Constantine said he was "distressed" Straight officials would make such a sudden move contrary to the progress they had achieved, but said "the substance of the agreement will stand whether it applies to a Sarasota branch or not."

Constantine said he met with Gardner recently to discuss the state attorney's concerns and said they could have been resolved through wording changes in the agreement with Straight. Based on several meetings, Constantine said Straight was willing to meet all of Gardner's and HRS' guidelines.

"I'm mad as hell for one and deeply saddened," Sarasota parent Sandy Nichols said about the temporary closing of the facility that salvaged his two daughters from drug-dependent lifestyles. "I've got two children who are now productive and an asset to society and to themselves. But when you've got government interfering with things they're not knowledgeable about, it's a travesty."

Added Nichols, who is president of Straight's local administrative board, "We've got people coming here from states all over and they're desperate. Unless you're in a similar situation you can't understand (the program's value)."

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