

Sarasota Herald-Tribune

This Area's Great Morning Newspaper

Four Sections—58 Pages

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 22, 1983



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Englewood

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Section B

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Straight Inc. Granted Temporary License To Operate

Herald-Tribune Report

Straight Inc. will continue to operate in Sarasota under a 90-day license, pending the outcome of recent efforts by Straight officials to meet stricter state standards.

The temporary license is the second issued by the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services following a critical report released by

State Attorney James A. Gardner in March and numerous complaints from parents and former clients.

If Straight's Sarasota and St. Petersburg facilities comply with new operating guidelines set forth by the state, the two drug programs will be granted one-year licenses, according to HRS District VIII

Administrator Robert Constantine.

Straight Executive Director Bill Oliver is confident the program will live up to the public's expectations.

"We feel real good about the resolution with HRS (because) we feel the problems have been resolved," he said.

Oliver said he is unaware of further complaints against

Straight's methods of breaking teenagers from their drug habits since the criticism arose this spring, but would welcome them. "Those kinds of things let us know what we're doing wrong," he said.

Oliver added, "I think one of the problems was instead of receiving complaints all along they came all bunched up."

Straight and the HRS have agreed to a 12-point proposal that will ensure rights of clients are protected and that abuses said to have occurred in the past will not happen again.

In addition to Straight's branches in St. Petersburg and Sarasota, it operates in Atlanta, Cincinnati and Alexandria, Va.

Straight is regarded by some drug abuse experts as the most successful treatment program in the nation. The Pinellas County facility was visited last year by First Lady Nancy Reagan.

But its controversial methods have been investigated by state prosecutors in Florida twice in the past year and last month a federal jury in Alexandria, Va., awarded \$220,000 damages to a former client it

prospective clients will be told within two hours of their initial "intake" interview that it is a voluntary program and clients must be free to leave at any time.

Clients 18 and older can withdraw immediately after discussing their decision with a senior Straight client or staff member, while those under 18 will follow the same procedure, but be released only to their parents or HRS.

Staff members will be allowed to physically restrain clients only when necessary to prevent them from injuring themselves or others and each incident must be supervised by an adult staff member and detailed in a written report.

Straight also will insure that "withholding of food and medical care is never used as a form of punishment."

Gardner submitted the allegations to HRS officials who sought the policy changes, and

Russell's office said an "active file" was being maintained on the organization.

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andria, Va., awarded \$220,000 damages to a former client it ruled had been held illegally at the Virginia and St. Petersburg branches for more than four months last year.

Oliver said the changes Straight agreed to make are intended to resolve the program's differences with the HRS, prevent future allegations of abuse and help the program clear its reputation.

Among complaints filed with state officials were allegations people were held against their will, were forcibly restrained, beaten, deprived of sleep, had restricted diets and poor medical treatment and had periods of isolated confinement, as well as physical and mental abuse.

Under the agreement, Straight will provide a private telephone for clients to use in calling the HRS, either to report abuses or to seek help in withdrawing from the program.

Under another provision,

medical care is never used as a form of punishment."

The Florida investigations of Straight were conducted by Gardner and Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney James T. Russell.

No criminal charges were filed in either case, but

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