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Tuesday, June 28, 1983

Section B

Gardner Criticizes **Straight Inc.** Agreement

Herald-Tribune Report

State Attorney James A. Gardner says the state has not gone far enough to ensure a local drug rehabilitation program abides by the law in preventing child abuse.

Gardner criticized the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services' handling of an agreement to correct alleged abuses at the Sarasota branch of Straight Inc. "I want some questions answered," he said.

Gardner concluded a year-long investigation into Straight in April and turned over sworn statements of more than 50 persons critical of the program to the HRS for corrective action. Former clients, parents and staff members described incidents of teenagers being signed into the program against their will and later denied the opportunity to leave. They also described under oath incidents in which clients were subjected to excessive physical force, were denied food and water and were held in unsafe conditions.

Since April, HRS District VIII Admin-

istrator Robert Constantine and Straight Executive Director Bill Oliver have struck a 13-point agreement that resulted in Straight receiving a temporary license renewal June 20. If the corrective actions prescribed by the HRS are fulfilled by late September, Straight will receive an annual license.

He highlighted portions of the agreement he believes are unclear and could be illegal. He said that in response to excessive use of physical restraints, Straight clients and staff members will be forbidden from sitting upon a teenager to force the misbehaving youth into submission. What it does not prevent, Gardner said, is Straight employees and clients from grabbing others by the throat and shaking them into submission, a complaint that was raised by a former client.

Clients also will not be given adequate freedom in telephoning authorities about alleged abuses while enrolled in the program, Gardner continued. The HRS and Straight agreed to grant teens access to a

telephone, but only if the call is "monitored" by a staff member at another telephone. Straight's Oliver said the staff member would not eavesdrop but would simply place the call to the HRS and ensure from another telephone that the client does not disconnect the call and place a personal call instead.

The HRS also endorsed Straight's request to discharge any client who places "spurious" or "unfounded" calls. Gardner said the threat of dismissal from the \$3,000 program will have a "chilling effect" on teens making outside calls.

"If Florida changes its law and says any organization can... grab somebody by the throat and batter them, tell them when they can place a call, monitor what should be a private phone call and punish them for making unfounded complaints, then fine. But the Legislature has never said this," Gardner said.

Gardner decided against filing charges against the rehabilitation program after his original investigation.