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Tuesday, June 28, 1983

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Section B

Gardner Blasts New Rules For 'Straight'

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 Administrator 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.

In a letter to Constantine, Gardner asks for clarification on the mutual agreement reached between Straight and its licensing agency. Gardner said he does not think the new policies will protect teens from the abuses they alleged in the past.

"As things stand today, this is not acceptable to me," Gardner said.

Gardner decided against filing charges against the rehabilitation program after his original investigation, but warned Straight officials last spring they would be expected to live up to new standards or he would do everything within his power to shut the program down.