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Sports On Back Page

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Section B

Straight Adjusts Rules For Client Release

By MARK ZALOUDEK
Herald-Tribune Reporter

Straight Inc. promises to let any teenage client walk out the doors of its Sarasota drug rehabilitation program voluntarily in response to new guidelines established by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.

Persons above the age of 18 can leave "immediately" if they are unhappy with any stage of their treatment, Straight Executive

Director Bill Oliver said. Minors will be released to their parents or the HRS within 24 hours of their request.

The immediate release of adults is more lenient than the HRS originally requested.

"I think they're very anxious now to make sure no one is being held against his will," observed HRS District VIII Administrator Robert Constantine in the wake of Straight's first major court defeat last month.

An Alexandria, Va., jury reconvened recent-

ly to award 20-year-old Fred Collins Jr., a former Straight client, \$220,000 in damages after he testified he was held captive in Straight's St. Petersburg and Alexandria, Va., facilities.

Constantine of the HRS said he expects his agency and Straight will have reached 100 percent agreement within two weeks on new guidelines aimed to correct numerous complaints raised about the Sarasota program's operation on Cattlemen Road. The two agen-

cies are making last-minute revisions in a binding agreement that Straight already has accepted in principle.

Two months ago, Straight was handed a list of 13 corrective actions by its state licensing agency aimed to prevent:

- Teens from being coerced into enrolling in the voluntary treatment program or prevented from leaving.

See **STRAIGHT** Page 2-BM

Straight

(Continued From Page 1-B)

- Teens from being denied food, medical attention and reasonable privacy.

- Foster homes from violating health and fire standards by bolting doors and windows.

- Clients from receiving excessive physical abuse or being denied access to a telephone to report suspected cases of abuse to the HRS.

The corrective actions ordered by the HRS arose from testimony gathered by State Attorney James A. Gardner during a year-long investigation into the rehabilitation program. Clients, ex-staff members and parents complained to Gardner of various forms of mistreatment.

Straight's Oliver said his re-

habilitation program has policies designed to prevent the abuses charged. If the complaints leveled by former clients and parents are true, he said, it's in violation of existing approved practices.

Straight is currently operating under a 90-day interim license that expires June 20. Constantine said he will likely renew its license for another 90 days and, if Straight is in compliance with the new guidelines, it could receive an annual license.

"Most of them can be implemented rather easily. It's just a matter of reaffirming a policy where they say it's on their books already or making the staff aware of some of their policies," Constantine said.

"I'm really not trying to

dictate their program philosophies or procedures," he added, noting he is trying to let program officials run their rehabilitation facility as they see fit while the HRS serves as a watchdog to make sure clients are not being mistreated or that they are not being denied their civil liberties.

Constantine said he plans to periodically monitor Straight with the help of Sarasota's HRS office and drug-abuse program specialists from the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Program office in Tallahassee to ensure compliance.

Oliver said he feels "very good" about earlier discussions between Straight and HRS and expects the matter will be resolved in one week. Most of the recommendations are already in place, he added, and have been reviewed with members of his staff.