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Section B

Ex-Straight Employees' Testimony Supports Charges Of Physical Abuse

By MARK ZALOUDEK
Herald-Tribune Reporter

Charges by teenage clients of physical abuse and being held against their will in a former Sarasota drug rehabilitation clinic are supported in sworn testimony by former employees, the *Herald-Tribune* has learned.

Documents made public this week indicate employees of Straight Inc. of Sarasota-Manatee allowed many of the allegations that prompted a 12-month criminal investigation by State Attorney James A. Gardner.

The employees were granted immunity from prosecution in return for their information about the closely guarded rehabilitation clinic, according to officials of the state attorney's office. Officials of the St. Petersburg-based Straight have

since suspended Sarasota County operations.

Gardner released information from the investigation after deciding not to prosecute Straight Inc. when it withdrew from his three-county jurisdiction in July.

"We weren't trying and never did try to make any kind of judgment as to the value of the program. We started from the likelihood that the program serves a (public) benefit, but we felt it should operate within state law," said Assistant State Attorney David Levin, who headed the investigation.

Levin subpoenaed four employees, including former director Hugh Burns, in gathering information about the controversial "tough love" clinic's Sarasota operations. He also took hundreds of pages

of testimony from current and former clients over the past year.

Although more than half of the teenagers in the program voluntarily committed themselves for rehabilitation, they were apparently misled about the ease by which they could be released into the custody of their parents, the sworn testimony indicates. Those same documents reveal that clients over 18, having reached adulthood, also found it difficult to leave a program that had no legal means to keep them.

"I've told people that are under 18 that they cannot leave the program due to impulsive decision-making," senior staff

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Straight Inc.

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supervisor Chris ██████ of Straight Inc. told investigators.

"In other words, when they have requested to leave, it would have been irresponsible for me to say, 'Yes, here's the door, go...' because they were chemically dependent and psychologically unsure to make a sound decision for their life," continued the 24-year-old Manatee Junior College student and former Straight client.

He said he advised youths to try the program for 14 days before they were allowed to leave.

"Up until a month ago, it had been just an accepted fact by the staff that anyone who was under the age of 18 could not pull themselves," senior staff member Tony ██████ said in sworn testimony last February.

And if someone 18 or older decided to walk out, ██████ said the person would be restrained before ever reaching the door by other clients.

██████ said it would take one to two

days typically to process a withdrawal and notify a client's parents, but some teens were held for up to two weeks after making requests to leave.

"State law says any unconsented touching constitutes battery," said Levin.

"You'll see from their statements that Straight has a policy to keep kids in there for a specific period of time before they would even consider a request to leave," he said.

Levin added that Straight Clinical Director Miller Newton "tried to convince us that whatever happened in Sarasota was Hugh Burns' fault. I think as you read through these, you'll see that isn't the case. These are all St. Pete-directed activities."

Burns was terminated suddenly Dec. 6, 1982 and, in his termination notice, was prohibited from making any public statement about his involvement with the program, although he cooperated with law authorities.

Testimony taken from former staff members also lends credence to some

previous clients' complaints that they were strong-armed into signing into the program.

"Would a prospective client ever be threatened with a court-ordering into the program?" Levin asked ██████

"Yes," he replied, "...if there's been like criminal activity, if he's been stealing things from his parents or something like that, we'd say, well, you know, your parents are thinking of court-ordering you to the program because of such-and-such activities that you've done and, you know, it would make it easier on yourself if you'd just sign yourself in instead of having to go through court and all that stuff."

Straight employees also admitted to:

- Enrolling brothers and sisters of clients who were not regular drug users;
- Spending as much as 12 or 13 hours to coax a prospective client to enroll;
- Encouraging graduates to return to the program for engaging in premarital sex, a program violation, regardless of whether they resumed their drug habits.