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**'Straight' Drug Cure Program Headed Here****BYLINE:** By MOLLY MOORE, Washington Post Staff Writer**SECTION:** Maryland Weekly; Md. 1**LENGTH:** 1408 words

A Florida-based drug and alcohol rehabilitation program that plans to open a branch in the Washington metropolitan area this fall has been criticized heavily in other cities where it operates for its intensive treatment methods of treating youths.

Straight, Inc. centers in St. Petersburg, Fla., Atlanta and Cincinnati have been subjects of legal action and strong criticism that treatment methods are too harsh. The program has a center in Sarasota, Fla., which also has been a target of critics.

Straight Inc. officials say the program is "very intense" but brush off the criticism as "nonsense" and point to what they consider a high success rate. They say about 57 percent of the youths who have graduated from the program during the past six years have broken their drug and alcohol habits. But dropout rates are high, officials add, and the success rate may represent only about a fourth of the youngsters who actually enroll in the program.

"Anything with the kind of involvement this program demands is going to have those problems (of criticism)," said Mel Riddile, who has been named director of the Washington Straight chapter. Riddile recently left his position as coordinator of drug and alcohol abuse programs for the **Fairfax** County Public Schools to take the job.

Miller Newton, clinical director of the nationwide Straight network, said the six-year-old program has been described by many experts as "the state of the art in drug treatment."

"It's a brutal program," countered Margie Robertson, director of the Cincinnati chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. "I call it a concentration camp for throwaway kids." She said her office began receiving complaints about the program within the first six weeks of its operation in Cincinnati, but has not yet taken any legal action.

About 90 youths from Maryland, Virginia and the District are enrolled in the St. Petersburg chapter, said Newton. A group of the youths' parents have begun to raise money to open the Washington chapter.

The organizers, who need \$450,000 to launch the program, have collected about \$232,000 since February, said Rex Hartgraves of Vienna, a coordinator for the drive. Hartgraves placed his 20-year-old son in the St. Petersburg program seven months ago.

"It very well could have saved my son's life," said Hartgraves.

Straight has spawned controversy in each of the cities where it now operates. Some complaints have resulted in investigations and court action, but Riddile said, "There hasn't been anything that has been proven."

The controversies and criticism have included:

\* In 1978, a Florida state's attorney investigated allegations by former Straight counselors that a participant was threatened with a handgun and others were forcibly detained. The investigation ended without legal action.

\* An attorney for the ACLU in Atlanta last year filed habeas corpus petitions on behalf of five patients allegedly being held against their will in the program. The case was dismissed because some of the youths testified they were in the program voluntarily. But a community panel was established to study allegations of improper treatment and confinement of youngsters at the facility.

\* Several parents filed habeas corpus petitions to remove children who were placed in Straight by separated or divorced spouses. These and other parents have accused the program of physically and mentally abusing their children as part of routine therapy procedures.

\* Straight was organized partially by participants of another controversial drug treatment program, The Seed, which disbanded in the mid-1970s after much criticism of its techniques. A national mental health organization likened The Seed's program "to highly refined brainwashing techniques employed by the North Koreans in the 1950s," The St. Petersburg Times reported.

But even Straight's most vocal opponents admit that for some young people the program works.

"Our defeat has been that the program is successful, it works," said Leonard Lubin, a St. Petersburg attorney who is highly critical of the program. "One can't doubt it achieves success. The question is what price do you pay to achieve good?"

Many of the youngsters enrolled in the program are hard-core drug users and pushers who have had repeated encounters with law enforcement officials. Others are youths who have only dabbled in drugs and whose parents hope to avert long-term problems.

Straight officials say their program hinges on strict demands for participation by a youth's entire family.

Parents who live where the programs are being held must attend group meetings with other parents, children and the Straight staff every Monday and Friday nights. Meetings begin early in the evening and sometimes last until past midnight. Some parents have reported being locked out of meetings if they arrive even a few minutes past the starting time.

Out-of-town parents are required to spend one four-day weekend each month in St. Petersburg attending the same meetings. Brothers and sisters are required to submit to sometimes-tough interviews with the staff and participate in family group forums.

Demands on the participants, who range in age from 12 to 21, are even tougher.

"It's intense, very intense," said Newton.

New participants called "intakes" stand during their first group meeting and are ordered to recount the details of their past lives as "druggies."

They sit through 16 hours of counseling and group therapy each day. The rules are: no television, no games, no magazines, no outside distractions. Just constant rap sessions, drills, verbal confrontations-- attempts to wean the drug or alcohol abuser from past dependencies and life styles.

For at least the first two weeks, the intakes can't make a move without an "oldcomer," an advanced participant, at their side. They are followed to the bathroom, followed to meals, followed to bed. Once in bed, they are sometimes locked

inside their rooms.

Florida's department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, which licenses the St. Petersburg chapter, last year ordered the program to discontinue the practice of using certain locks to keep youngsters in bedrooms, citing safety hazards. Newton said that aspect of the program has been modified, although youths are still confined to their rooms at times. The agency also criticized Straight for sloppy record keeping on some of its participants' medical and personal files. This year's follow-up report by the agency indicated Straight had corrected those problems and gave the program a positive review.

Straight officers said one shortcoming of the program is its high dropout rate. Although 2,600 participants have enrolled in the four Straight chapters since the first was founded in St. Petersburg, "The number who actually graduate is much lower than that," said Newton. He said about 56 percent of the youths dropped out of the program in its early years. The dropout rate declined to about 18 percent last year, he said.

Newton blames most of the dropouts "on parents who get tired of what it takes." Many parents complain, however, that their children frequently run away from the program.

"It (the program) is not for everybody," said Riddile.

Washington area organizers said the program has received strong financial support from local businesses. The parents also have cultivated support among area public officials including Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.) who hosted the news conference announcing the fund-raising campaign for Straight.

There is a critical shortage of drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs for youths in the Washington area, said Riddile. Most of the available programs cost thousands of dollars and have long waiting lists, he said. Straight organizers estimate they could easily fill 300 to 350 places in a local program.

Once under way, about 70 percent of the program will be financed with tuition fees. Florida youths are charged \$2,100 for the program, which usually takes an average of 11 months to complete. In addition, Straight requires about \$35 a month for the youth's food allowance. Out-of-town youths pay another \$120 a month to cover the costs of local families who serve as temporary guardians for the patients.

The local fees probably will be slightly more to offset the higher costs of rental space and supplies in the Washington area, said William Burns of Burtonsville, one organizer of the local Straight chapter.

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