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'Straight' To Open Area Chapter**BYLINE:** By MOLLY MOORE, **Washington Post** Staff Writer**SECTION:** District Weekly; DC1**LENGTH:** 1530 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 methods of treating youths.

Straight Inc. programs in St. Petersburg, Atlanta and Cincinnati have been subjects of legal action and strong criticism that treatment procedures are too harsh. The program's center in Sarasota also has drawn fire.

Officials of **Straight** Inc. acknowledge that their program is "very intense," but brush off the criticism as "nonsense" and point to what they consider a high success rate. They say that about 57 percent of the youths who 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 one-fourth of the youths 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 formerly was coordinator of **drug** and alcohol abuse programs for the Fairfax County Public Schools.

Miller Newton, clinical director of the nationwide **Straight** network, said that the 6-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 that her office received 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 the District, Maryland and Virginia are enrolled in the St. Petersburg chapter, Newton said. A group of the youths' parents has 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, 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 operates. Some complaints have resulted in investigations and court action but, Riddile noted, "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 youths 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. A community panel was established to study allegations of improper treatment and confinement of youths at the facility.

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

Straight was organized partly by participants of another controversial **drug** treatment program, The Seed, that 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.

The program has been criticized in some areas for ignoring the needs of poor families and for its low enrollment of minorities.

Newton insisted that no one has been turned away from the program for lack of money. He said the tuition fee is assessed on a sliding scale that ranges from \$2,100 to \$750, based upon family income. The fee is for the full program, which takes an average of 11 months. In rare instances, some participants are charged as little as \$5 a month.

All participants are charged for their meals, the cost of which is about \$35 a month in the Florida program.

He acknowledged that the program's clientele is "overwhelmingly white," but denied that the program discriminates against minorities. He pointed out that five or six minority youths are enrolled in the St. Petersburg chapter.

Straight officials say that 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 staff of **Straight** every Monday and Friday evening. Meetings begin early and sometimes continue past midnight. Some parents have reported being locked out of meetings if they arrived even a few minutes after the starting time.

Parents who live out of town are required to spend one four-day weekend each month in St. Petersburg attending the same meetings. Brothers and sisters of youths in the program must submit to sometimes tough interviews with the staff and to participate in family group forums.

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

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

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

They sit through 12 to 16 hours of counseling and group therapy each day. Television, games, magazines and outside distractions are prohibited; instead, youths participate in constant rap sessions, drills, verbal confrontations -- what program officials described as attempts to wean the **drug** or alcohol abuser from past dependencies and life styles.

For about 12 hours a day, the youths attend sessions at a building that serves as the chapter's center. Late in the evening local youngsters return to their homes and participants from out of town are farmed out among the local families that are participating in the program. The strict rules follow the participants home.

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 sometimes are locked in their rooms by their parents or temporary guardians.

Florida's department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, which licenses the St. Petersburg chapter, last year ordered the program to discontinue using certain locks to keep youngsters in bedrooms, citing safety hazards.

Newton said that that aspect of the program has been modified, with youths now confined to their rooms by the use of alarms that sound if they try to leave. The agency also criticized **Straight** for sloppy recordkeeping on some participants' medical and personal files. This year's follow-up report by the agency indicated that **Straight** had corrected those problems, and gave the program a positive review.

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

Newton blamed 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," Riddile said.

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

Once the program is under way here, about 70 percent of its costs will be covered by tuition fees, with the remainder funded by donations from private businesses and foundations.

Washington organizers said that fees locally probably will be slightly higher, to offset the higher costs of rental space and supplies in the metropolitan area.

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