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Controversy Over Drug Program Extends to New Va. Clinic

BYLINE: By Eve Zibart, Washington Post Staff Writer

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The one-story brick building near an industrial park in Springfield seems as nondescript as the warehouses it borders. Inside the one-time sporting goods store, however, one of the toughest drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs in the country is waging what it calls a life-or-death battle for 143 children of the "chemical society."

For 12 hours and more every day, teen-aged patients, or "clients" of Straight, Inc. must come here to confess and renounce their habits in front of their peers. There is no sanctity of the confessional: Straight claims that through this "reality therapy" and concentrated peer pressure, it can excise the habit and the frustration and confusion that caused it.

According to William Oliver, Straight's national executive director, the organization turns "adolescent drug-users into highly motivated, goal-oriented, drug-free members of society." He and other Straight officials claim that the drug and alcohol treatment program has had a 60 to 70 percent success rate among some 3,000 patients treated around the country since the program was founded in Florida in 1976.

It was that figure, along with the national publicity surrounding a visit by Nancy Reagan to the organization's center in St. Petersburg, Fla. last February, that led the **Fairfax** County Board of Supervisors to extend a warm welcome to Straight Inc. in September, when the board approved the establishment of a Straight, Inc. clinic in Springfield.

Less than three months after the clinic's opening, however, it is embroiled in controversy, with some parents and former patients charging that Straight, Inc.'s methods constitute a brutal and damaging form of brainwashing.

In a suit filed last month in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Fred Collins, a 20-year-old former patient, charges that he was imprisoned by the program and his parents for 5 1/2 months, and accuses Straight, Inc. of physical and psychological abuse.

In affidavits filed in connection with the suit, ex-clients and relatives cite additional instances of harassment and intimidation. One man claims that his younger brother, still in the program, was coerced into enrolling "voluntarily" after 12 hours' pressure. A young woman says that she was "marathonned," or forcibly kept awake for more than 80 hours, and forced to wear a blue hospital-type shirt with the word "psychotic" written on the back. And an Alexandria man says that he saw a friend who had escaped from the program kidnaped by three men who returned him to the facility.

It is not the first time that such allegations have been made against Straight, Inc. The program now operates clinics in five cities, and nearly all have been embroiled in controversy.

Four years ago in St. Petersburg, a Florida state's attorneys office investigated allegations by former Straight, Inc. counselors that patients were detained involuntarily. After three months, the state's attorneys office concluded that while

some of the allegations might be true, there was insufficient evidence to prosecute.

In 1981, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union in Atlanta filed petitions on behalf of five patients said to be held against their will. The cases were dropped when the five testified in favor of the program, but a community oversight group was formed in Atlanta.

Dr. Miller Newton, Straight's national clinical director, denies that there has been any physical or psychological abuse in **Fairfax** or anywhere else and says "the charges this time" are "probably the most reckless exaggeration yet." Oliver points to an Ohio Council on Drug Abuse report that described the program as viable and effective, although the report dealt only with the program and not with any specific allegations brought against it.

Newton contends that Straight, while tough, represents the "state of the art" in drug treatment: A combination of reality therapy and peer pressure similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. Many rehabilitation experts agree that peer group influence is one of the most powerful of therapeutic weapons, but warn that the weapon can be double-edged.

"They're on to something good, but they may be overshooting the mark," says Dr. William Flynn, director of Georgetown University's Drug and Alcohol Clinic. "What happens with a lawsuit is they start to back down, and things change for the better."

Dr. Steven Katkin, who was instrumental in instituting a Straight program in the Cincinnati area before breaking with Straight, Inc. over the issue of monitoring, says that there "does seem to be a core of truth" to some of the complaints.

"When I was referring patients to Straight, I heard only positive things about it from the kids themselves," Katkin says. "When we started Kids Helping Kids [another drug rehabilitation program], most of our staff had been to Straight, and we inadvertently discovered from talking to them that they had been physically pushed around and intimidated."

But satisfied customers, both parents and patients, maintain that the ends justify the means.

"If I hadn't come in the program, I'd be dead," says one 16-year-old. Adds ██████████ a former client now on the organization's staff: "I can't say I liked it all, but it was probably necessary. Besides, when I started doing drugs, I lost my rights."

Experts are reluctant to discuss the Straight program in detail because, as a private treatment facility that receives no state or national funding, it declines to have its program evaluated and needs only to be licensed by the states in which it operates. Nevertheless, they see some potential hazards.

"If there's not some kind of moderating influence, group pressure can be very tyrannical" in adolescence, according to Flynn.

George Beschner, a treatment expert at the National Institute of Drug Abuse, says that some emotionally and mentally unstable persons "don't need that strong confrontation."

"You have to be willing to give up a piece of yourself, to open yourself up, especially in the early days," Beschner explains, "and psychiatrists are very careful about forcing people to open up before they're ready."

But according to Straight, Inc. theory, slow response is a form of "denial," and stripping it away leaves no time for social amenities.

The clinic in Springfield was funded by area residents who had enrolled their children in the St. Petersburg program. When the clinic opened last October 140 patients, all originally from the Washington area, were flown from Florida to the new facility in a chartered jetliner.

The 143 teen-agers now enrolled in the local program generally are the sons and daughters of suburban, middle-class

families. They are not addicts from the ghetto, but abusers of social drinking and of a whole candy store of chemicals.

Some of the youths are referred to Straight, Inc. by psychologists or are ordered by courts to complete a rehabilitation program to escape sentencing on drug charges. A few enroll voluntarily, usually drug users who already have a friend or sibling in the program. Most are enrolled by their parents.

The patient's family is required to participate, first through extensive interviews, then through "open meetings" twice a week, and ultimately as a "foster family" to other drug abusers. Family therapy is essential because, Newton insists: "Chemical dependency is a family disease. A kid gets into drugs and starts acting crazy, everyone has to react to that."

A new patient, called either a "newcomer," or "First Phaser," is strip-searched upon arrival and then turned over to an "oldcomer" who maintains almost constant physical contact, slipping a finger through the newcomer's belt loop or touching his shoulder. A newcomer is never alone, even in the bathroom, and goes home at night to his oldcomer's family. Phase One lasts for a minimum of 14 days.

From the first day, a patient continually must repeat to the group the ritual confession: name, his age and such credentials as, "the drugs I have used are pot, alcohol, PCP, uppers, downers, cocaine, heroin, hash, hash oil, Thai stick, LSD . . . and I believe I am a druggie."

During the Second Phase, the patient moves back home, but is required to be at the clinic from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m. In the Third Phase, the patient returns to school or work, but goes directly to the clinic afterward. During the Fourth Phase, he or she is "off," or free of the clinic, for three days a week. In the Fifth Phase, this is extended to four days.

Straight, Inc. combines reality and rational therapy, akin to the "control your thinking, control your life" theories often popularized in self-help books, with a heavy dose of family input. Group meetings are followed by "family raps," and conversations among the foster family tend to become an extension of therapy.

But one disaffected parent, a substance-abuse counselor herself, dismisses the raps as "confrontations" and the constant emotional crises as "substitute highs."

Flynn agrees that counseling is where Straight falls short.

"They're not really doing therapy, they're doing programming," says Flynn. "Their idea of 'reality therapy' is to hit you over the head with a two-by-four, saying, 'Your son is a drug abuser.' In terms of working through anything toward a long-term solution, it isn't there."

Straight, Inc.'s adult staff members all have had experience in drug abuse treatment. Dr. Mel Riddile, the Springfield clinic director, formerly was coordinator of substance abuse prevention for the **Fairfax** County Schools. Newton was the director of the Florida Association of Alcohol Treatment Programs and the director of Straight's St. Petersburg clinic before becoming national director.

But the staff is small. Riddile and associate director Suzanne Byrd are the only two full-time professionals at the Springfield clinic. They are assisted by a paraprofessional, eight staff members, and junior staffers or staffers in training, who are former patients.

"Some of these programs have a tendency to get too big, and then you have the problem of monitoring your teen-age staff," says Katkin. "It can become like a fraternity rite, like razzing."

The cost of Straight is high in economic, as well as emotional terms. The up-front "lifetime" fee in **Fairfax** County is \$4,000. In addition, during a patient's first three phases, the parents are charged \$50 a month for food and, in the fourth and fifth phases, \$35 a month. If a patient needs shoes or a new sweater, he or she writes this on the "Wants List" and the parents purchase it. Parents also contribute after open meetings to a "honey pot" passed around the room.

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If Straight's lawyers succeed in having the case tried in Florida, where most of the alleged abuses took place, the local furor may subside. Meanwhile, at the Springfield clinic, the penitents continue to chant their refrain: "I am strong, I am invincible, I am Straight."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: Pictures 1 and 2, Dr. Miller Newton, and William Oliver of Straight, Inc., deny that physical abuse plays any part in their method of rehabilitating youthful drug abusers. Photos by Ray Lustig -- The Washington Post

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Controversy Over Drug Program Extends to Springfield

*Straight
File*

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