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ALEXANDRIA, Va., May 25 /PRN/ -- A federal jury today assessed **Straight Inc.**, a Florida-based drug rehabilitation program, with \$220,000 in punitive and compensatory damages for what Straight attorneys called a "technical and procedural mistake" on how the organization dealt with the withdrawal of a 20-year-old man, **Fred Collins Jr.**, of Alexandria, Straight reported.

The six-member civil jury reported to U.S. District Court Judge Albert Bryan Jr. that Collins be granted \$40,000 in compensatory damages and \$180,000 in punitive damages.

Straight attorney Ronald L. Goldfarb said he was "shocked and dismayed" by the verdict, even though Collins had been seeking \$750,000 in damages. "We will appeal this decision," Goldfarb said outside the courtroom.

"The issue in the courtroom was money," according to William Oliver, Straight's executive director. "Straight deals with lives; that's the business we're in. This case only showed we care too much for life and sometimes try too hard to save someone."

He added, "We're going to continue our fight because, if we don't, the real losers will be the families -- the kids and parents -- caught up in the drug problem."

Straight's clinical director, Dr. Miller Newton, said: "All of us at one time or another in our lives need someone to help us in our decision-making process. While the monetary damages are meaningful, the fact remains that we -- and others in the drug abuse counseling field -- will not be able to help adults when they may need help the most: when they think they want to go back to their self-destructive, drug-dependent ways."

The Collins verdict and damages assessment will have implications "not only for Straight, but for every other treatment program in the country," according to Dr. Mel Riddile, local Straight director. "Every time someone over 18 wants to leave, we'll all have to let them walk out instead of trying to convince them it's in their own best interest to stay.

"Obviously there has been talk about the court case among our clients, families and staff, but many people here and in the community agree with us that our family-oriented program is greatly successful because of the tough, but genuine, love and concern we

show our youth," Riddile remarked.

"We've known all along that Straight isn't for everyone," said Straight's Oliver. He added "The fact of the matter is Straight works. We have a success rate that is unequalled by other drug rehabilitation programs."

Newton concluded: "The key issue is the treatment of youth. The real question is: do we love and care about kids? The answer is an unequivocal 'yes.' At Straight, staff and families as well love and care about the kids./NOTE -- Actuality available by calling WBN at 202-393-6366.

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