

STATE WON'T CLOSE CENTER CITED FOR ALLEGED ABUSES

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State officials say they won't close a private drug treatment center cited for numerous violations including failing to report allegations that a 13-

year-old boy was sexually abused by another patient.

"People do have moments when they make mistakes. It takes a great deal for us to get to the point we feel we have enough evidence to go that far," said Barry Craig, director of licensing for the state mental health department, of Straight Inc.'s program in Fairfax County. The department licenses drug treatment facilities in the state.

Straight spokeswoman Joy C. Margolis said program officials notified the county as soon as they heard of the alleged abuse last December.

Straight signed a consent agreement in July, promising to correct its actions.

The citation is one of at least 45 violations the state has found at Straight in recent years. The residential program for adolescents also has been the target of lawsuits locally and nationally.

"I was appalled by the allegations of misconduct and abuse and harassment of children who are already in a bad way or they wouldn't be there in the

first place," said state Del. Gerald A. Fill, R-Alexandria.

Since 1985, violations have included allowing strip searches of youths in front of their peers, punishing patients by withholding food and depriving

youths of education in the early days of treatment, state records say.

According to state documents, Straight has been cited over the years for punishing clients by depriving them of sleep, drinking water, snacks, meals and visits with parents or legal guardians.

Straight has said it did not administer those punishments. Straight officials maintained that clients were treated with dignity consistent with health, safety and therapy.

The non-profit program treats about 130 people ranging in age from 10 to the early 20s at the 8-year-old Fairfax facility. The Florida-based drug

treatment program for adolescents has eight facilities nationwide.

Straight officials say their program revolves around "positive peer pressure." Clients who have been in the program gain increasing authority to guide, and sometimes confront, newcomers in their recovery from drug use.

Treatment generally lasts about a year.

The 13-year-old said he had to ask for permission to eat, drink water and go to the bathroom during his two months at the center.

"If you want to get up and go to the bathroom, you have to wait until someone takes you. It's like a miniature hell," he said.

The youth said he was molested one night in a locked bathroom by an older patient assigned to supervise him.

Straight Inc. has drawn criticism throughout the country for its controversial rehabilitation program since it was founded in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1976.

Parents and clients have filed lawsuits against the program, alleging imprisonment and emotional and physical abuse. In 1985, a federal appeals court in Alexandria upheld a \$220,000 verdict against Straight after a Fairfax County man said he was falsely imprisoned.

Straight officials and some clients and parents defend the program. They say the restrictive program is necessary to gain control of troubled adolescents and has a 70 percent success rate.

The 13-year-old youth's parents say he still is affected by his experience at Straight and the alleged abuse.

"He was the littlest one there," said the boy's stepmother, who did not want to be identified. "They told me they were going to protect my son. They didn't.

"When (the boy) asked for help, I didn't ask a lot of questions," the stepmother said. "He wanted to go somewhere to get help. I got the Yellow

Pages. All I wanted was the best for him. Everything we wanted, Straight told me they were, and it turned out they weren't."

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