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Va. Cites Drug Treatment Center For Not Reporting Alleged Abuse; At Least 45 Violations Found Previously at Straight Inc. Facility

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A private drug treatment center in **Fairfax** County has been cited by Virginia officials for failing to notify county officials of allegations that a 13-year-old boy in the program had been sexually abused by an older client, according to state documents.

After an investigation, state mental health officials also found that Straight Inc., a Springfield drug treatment program for teenagers, allowed a 19-year-old client to stay in the program after he had been accused of sexually abusing two other clients in earlier incidents.

The citation is one of at least 45 violations found in recent years by the state against Straight, which also has been the target of lawsuits locally and nationally.

According to state records, the facility has been cited since 1985 for a series of violations including allowing clients to restrain other clients, depriving teenage clients of education during initial treatment stages, punishing them by depriving them of food, and strip-searching clients in the presence of peers.

Joy C. Margolis, vice president of public affairs for Straight, a Florida-based drug treatment program for adolescents that has eight facilities nationwide, said Straight officials notified the county as soon as they heard of the alleged abuse last December.

The private nonprofit program treats about 130 children and young adults at its Springfield facility, ranging in age from 10 to the early twenties. 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.

The program is divided in phases. Clients must progress from phase to phase until they graduate, which officials say takes about a year.

Although the facility, which opened in **Fairfax** in 1982, has been cited numerous times for violations, it has been allowed to continue to operate by state officials, who said the violations are not serious enough to warrant closure.

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

Barry Craig, director of licensure for the state mental health department, which licenses drug treatment facilities in the state, said overwhelming evidence must be assembled before such facilities can be closed. "It's a horrendous kind of

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thing," he said of the closure process. "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."

State Del. Gerald A. Fill (R-Mount Vernon), after receiving a letter from the 13-year-old's attorney, called for further investigation by the state's Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services.

"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," Fill said. "If we're to believe her letter, there are some serious abuses that have gone uncorrected, and the state and county should be jumping in with both feet to make sure there are no more abuses."

The 13-year-old, who spent two months at the Springfield facility, said he had to ask for permission to eat, drink water and go to the bathroom. "You wait until a staff member decides we can all go. You don't have control over nothing. 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."

The boy said he was molested one night in a locked bathroom as he was about to take a shower as his "oldcomer" monitored him. Oldcomers are advanced clients who are paired with those new to the facility.

"We were alone and all this stuff," the boy said. "He started acting all weird. He started wanting to hug me and all this stuff. He was feeling me all over my backside, like a guy grabs a girl's butt."

Straight Inc. has drawn criticism throughout the country for its controversial rehabilitation program since it was founded in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1976. Lawsuits have been filed against Straight by parents and clients alleging imprisonment and emotional and physical abuse. In 1985, an 18-year-old woman reached a \$ 37,500 settlement with Straight after she said she was held against her will and physically and mentally abused in the center in St. Petersburg.

Another woman said she was placed on a water and peanut butter diet for 29 days and was forced to strip naked in one of the host homes. In 1985, a federal appeals court in Alexandria upheld a \$ 220,000 verdict against Straight after a **Fairfax** County man claimed he was falsely imprisoned.

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.

The state also found other human rights violations, according to documents. The state said new clients, who are monitored constantly by advanced clients, were not given privacy in bathrooms, and some clients had been strip-searched in the presence of peers.

Straight officials maintained that clients were treated with dignity consistent with health, safety and the therapeutic model. Straight said clients were stripped only in the presence of a staff member of the same sex and two oldcomers of the same sex.

Straight officials and some clients and parents defend the program, praising it for its success in leading its clients to sobriety. They say the restrictive program is necessary to gain control of the teenagers. Straight officials maintain the program forces its clients out of denial and into recovery by positive peer pressure and family involvement, and claim a 70 percent success rate.

Although the program uses generally accepted techniques such as Alcoholics Anonymous's 12 steps, it has been criticized for its rap sessions, which are held for up to 10 hours in warehouses where youths are required to sit in plastic chairs and confess their drug abuse.

Some clients have claimed that when they were not cooperative, they were forced to the floor and held down by other youths in the program. In the past, Straight used a technique called "motivating," which has been characterized by wild

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waving of raised hands.

Margolis, the spokeswoman for Straight, said old practices of motivating and allowing clients to restrain clients are no longer used. She says restraints are now done only by trained counselors.

During the first phase, new clients, called newcomers, are monitored by oldcomers, who lead them by their belt loops whenever they move through the halls, go to the bathroom or line up for food. Some clients have said oldcomers even hold their wrists as they shower.

Straight officials say clients are given privacy while in the bathroom.

The 13-year-old boy's parents say he is still 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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