

STRAIGHT VIOLATIONS SAID FIXED - TREATMENT PROGRAM FIGHTS CLOSURE EFFORT

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Officials of a controversial Northern Virginia drug treatment program for teen-agers have asked Virginia's mental health department not to close it down.

Representatives from Straight Inc., a private drug-treatment center in Springfield, said yesterday they had corrected a number of the 76 licensing violations cited by the state and have plans for correcting others.

The Straight representatives outlined their corrective action plan during an informal conference here with officials of the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services.

The violations include:

- * Failing to list clients' middle names on registration forms.
- * Not posting emergency numbers on all telephones.
- * Not having medically trained staff members on duty at all times.
- * Not sending clients to school or providing a tutor for teen-agers who stay in the program from six months to a year.

Although it was not mentioned during yesterday's conference, state records say Straight failed to notify the proper officials of allegations that a 13-year-old boy in the program was sexually abused by an older client. Records also indicate the center failed to monitor a client who threatened suicide.

The Springfield center and one in Chesapeake, which closed this month, were operating under a court agreement that was issued last year after Washington-area parents complained about treatment at the Springfield facility.

The two centers, which used the same methods, were to change the way they restrained clients. The complaints said that unqualified individuals, including clients, were allowed to restrain clients if they decided to leave the program. In one case, a child's arm was broken, according to records.

The department notified the Springfield center Jan. 29 that it would not renew its license and that the program must close.

Straight asked for the informal conference, which is the first step in the state's appeal process. If the department does not accept Straight's corrective action plan, the center can request a formal hearing.

The Chesapeake center closed when state licensing inspectors made an unannounced visit there this month to investigate a complaint, said Jacqueline Ennis, an assistant commissioner with the mental health department.

"In the middle of the visit, they said they were going to close. We never completed the investigation," Ms. Ennis said.

Joy C. Margolis, vice president of public affairs in Straight's St. Petersburg, Fla., corporate office, said that the closure of the Chesapeake center was not related to the licensing inspection.

"Most of the families were from Springfield . . . (and) they decided to transfer to Springfield," she said. "The state had made a number of visits (to Chesapeake) and had not cited us for anything," she added.

Straight has 17 treatment facilities in the United States. The Springfield center opened in 1982 and the Chesapeake center in 1989. The Springfield program has about 100 clients. When it closed, the Chesapeake facility had 58. Straight's method of rehabilitation involves giving older clients increasing authority to influence newcomers through "positive peer pressure."

That method has been the subject of controversy, lawsuits and investigations since Straight was founded in Florida in 1976.

- Memo: (lko)

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