

STRAIGHT INC. CLOSES ITS TREATMENT CENTER IN SPRINGFIELD

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A drug treatment center that had been cited for numerous state licensing violations has closed voluntarily in Springfield but reopened in Maryland.

The Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, which licenses drug treatment programs, notified Straight Inc. earlier this year that its license would not be renewed and that it would have to close.

After an informal hearing in February, the department refused to rescind its notice of intent to deny the license.

Straight requested a formal hearing, which had been scheduled for today. However, Straight canceled the hearing and told department officials the center was closing.

According to Rick Sampson, director of Maryland's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Administration, Straight has opened a facility in Columbia, Md.

Sampson said he has told Straight officials that abusive practices will not be tolerated.

"I told them I will file charges if you hold kids against their will. . . . They told me these practices happened under the old program and (that) the administrator of the old program was released," he said.

Under Maryland regulations, Straight does not have to be certified to operate in the state because the program is accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Organizations, a national organization.

However, Carol Koenecke, administrator of the Columbia program, said Straight officials are working with Maryland officials to gain certification. She said the program in Columbia has 65 clients.

According to Virginia records, Straight has been cited in recent years for punishing clients by depriving them of sleep, drinking water, snacks, meals and visits with parents. Straight denied the allegations.

Virginia records also 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.

Joy C. Margolis, vice president of public affairs in Straight's national corporate office in St. Petersburg, Fla., said today that a parent group from the Springfield facility wanted the program moved to Maryland.

"The parent group said they wanted Straight to continue to treat their children and asked us to consider moving the program somewhere else," she said.

She also said that a Virginia mental health officials had told Straight several months ago that the program "was in complete compliance (with state licensing regulations). They made it very clear that no matter what happened at the hearing (scheduled for today), they were not going to renew our license because of . . . history," Ms. Margolis said.

She added that she did not know when the Columbia program would be in operation.

Asked the location of the adolescents who had been in the Springfield program, Ms. Margolis responded, "You would have to talk to the parents."

She also said she had no idea how many Virginia children were in the Springfield program.

A Richmond man whose son is in the program said he helped move the program over the weekend and the program was operating today in Columbia.

The Richmond parent, Robert Anderson, said, "We may be controversial to some people, but one thing that can always be said is that Straight works. It saved my son's life."

Yesterday, the Virginia mental health department began notifying operators of the treatment program's 36 "host homes," where adolescents enrolled in the program have been housed, that Straight's voluntary withdrawal of its appeal means that host homes are now

operating illegally without a license.

Assistant Mental Health Commissioner Jacqueline M. Ennis said that to mitigate impact on the program's clients, host homes will be allowed to operate another week.

The department will seek a court injunction against any Virginia host home in operation after next Tuesday, she said.

At the informal hearing in February, the department presented evidence of 76 licensing violations at the Springfield center. The center had been operating under a court agreement issued last year after Washington-area parents complained about Straight's treatment methods.

The Springfield center and a Straight center in Chesapeake, which closed in February, were to change the way they restrained clients. The complaints said unqualified individuals, including clients, were allowed to restrain other clients to prevent them from leaving the program. In one case, a child's arm was broken, according to records.

The Chesapeake center closed when state licensing inspectors made an unannounced visit there in February.

At today's hearing, the department intended to present evidence of additional recent licensing violations, Ms. Ennis said.

The additional violations were found by department inspectors who have continued to make unannounced visits to Straight.

Straight has 17 facilities in the United States. The Springfield center opened in 1982 and the Chesapeake center in 1989. The Springfield program had about 100 clients. The Chesapeake facility had 58 when it closed.

Straight's program 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.

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