

CLINIC CLOSES DOORS, CANCELS ITS APPEAL

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The Springfield office of Straight Inc., a controversial adolescent substance abuse treatment program, has closed its doors, according to the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services.

Straight Inc. canceled its appeal, scheduled to be heard today, of the department's decision to revoke its operating licenses. The department cited Straight Inc. for repeated violations "of both clinical and administrative nature."

The 76 licensing violations cited by the department ranged from failure to list clients' middle names on registration forms to not having medically trained staff members on duty at all times.

"It was apparent to us that we wouldn't have a fair hearing no matter what," said Joy Margolis, spokeswoman for the Florida-based Straight Inc. organization. She said the program had met all state requirements by last week.

The Springfield operations have been transferred to the program in Columbia, Md., according to Ms. Margolis.

Straight Inc. used a variety of controversial mental and physical techniques to deter children from drugs. The program's philosophy includes breaking down patients' defenses about drug use, a process critics have said can be demeaning.

"There were dehumanizing things being done," said Jacqueline M. Ennis, who supervises licensing for the department.

She cited "spit therapy," in which children could spit on one another as a way of reducing egos and the need for social acceptance. She also cited physical restraint of clients.

Ms. Margolis said the program had stopped using all methods the state found objectionable.

She said 60 percent to 70 percent of patients do not return to drug use after participating in the program, which can last a year or more.

"It's successful because it's long-term," Ms. Margolis said. "It changes them."

In late January, the department announced it was revoking the licenses of the Springfield program, which had been in operation since 1982. Straight Inc. appealed and asked for an informal hearing with department officials.

Following the hearing, the department decided there was no evidence that inspectors erred in their investigation of the program and upheld the revocation.

Straight Inc. then appealed for a formal hearing, which was scheduled for 10 a.m. today in front of an officer selected through the Virginia Supreme Court. But the program notified the attorney general's office July 19 that it would not pursue the appeal.

Department officials, who claimed to have evidence of additional violations since January, set Aug. 6 as the date by which the program must close. Inspectors in Springfield had observed moving operations in progress last week, according to Ms. Ennis.

The Aug. 6 date also is the deadline for Straight Inc. "host home" operators to move their residents, who are enrolled in the program.

The department licenses more than 800 programs statewide that provide mental health, mental retardation and substance abuse services.

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