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## **Drug Program Accused of Abuse Closes Va. Facility**

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A **drug**-abuse treatment program for adolescents that Virginia officials sought to shut down because of questionable practices has closed its facility in Springfield, but reopened the program across the border in Maryland.

**Straight** Inc., which Virginia officials have accused of abusive practices such as strip searches and "spit therapy," dropped its fight to continue to operate in Virginia.

**Straight's** decision to cease operations in Virginia came six months after the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services said it would not renew an operating license for the Springfield facility because of repeated human rights violations. **Straight** closed its Hampton Roads program in February.

**Straight** appealed the Springfield decision. It lost the first round of its challenge and a hearing was set for today in Richmond. However, in a July 19 letter to state officials, **Straight** said it wanted to cancel its appeal and voluntarily close.

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

Sampson said he met with **Straight** officials last week to tell them of his concerns and to notify them that abusive practices would not be tolerated in Maryland.

"There is a whole aura of controversy that surrounds these people," Sampson said. "I told them I will file charges if you hold kids against their will. I'm coming down on you every way I know. They told me these practices happened under the old program and [that] the administrator of the old program was released."

Sampson said that according to Maryland regulations, **Straight** does not have to be certified to operate in the state because the program is accredited by the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Health Organizations, a national organization. "If a program is JCAH-accredited, that is accepted by the state in lieu of state certifications," Sampson said. However, a recent Maryland task force recommended that **Straight** undergo certification by the state.

According to Virginia records, **Straight**, which opened the Springfield facility in 1982, 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 and said it did not administer those punishments.

Virginia officials also found that the Springfield program failed to notify county officials that a 13-year-old boy in the program had been sexually abused by another client, according to state documents.

"For the protection of the health and safety of youngsters enrolled in the **Straight** program, the department is gratified that the day treatment facility has closed," Jacqueline M. Ennis, assistant commissioner of the Virginia mental health agency, said in a statement yesterday. "**Straight** Inc.'s repeated violations have been of both clinical and administrative nature, posing a danger for **Straight** clients. Additionally, we had become convinced that despite its protestations and promises to improve, the operators of the **Straight** program had no firm intention to comply with Virginia's licensing regulations, nor with a consent agreement **Straight** entered into in July a year ago."

Joy Margolis, vice president of public affairs for **Straight**, which is based in Florida, said yesterday the program has changed some of its most controversial methods. Margolis said that the Springfield facility was in full compliance with state licensing regulations, but state officials still refused to issue another license.

"We've corrected all those problems. The only thing the state would discuss is past problems. They didn't seem to be interested in the present," Margolis said.

"We really feel the families in treatment have suffered tremendously as a result of harassment by the state," Margolis said. "We have worked hard to be in compliance. These are families who are really desperate and feel that **Straight** has really saved their lives."

The Springfield program, which treated about 100 clients aged 12 to early twenties, employed a series of steps similar to the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. **Straight** Inc., which has drawn criticism throughout the country for its controversial rehabilitation program since it was founded in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1976, claims a 70 percent success rate in treating **drug** abuse. Lawsuits have been filed against **Straight** by parents and clients alleging imprisonment and emotional and physical abuse.

Although the program has been criticized, several parents whose children went through it said they support **Straight** and that it works.

Linda Cannon, a District resident, said she sent both her teenage sons to the program last year after she discovered they were abusing **drugs**.

"I can't tell you what **Straight** has done for our family . . . My son who was using LSD thanked us for putting him in **Straight** and saving his life," Cannon said.

Cannon said, "I don't know what went on in the past [with **Straight**], but as a parent who had two sons in the program, if I had to scrub floors with a toothbrush to keep the program going, I would do that."

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