

5 TROUBLED PROGRAM IS FACING SHUTDOWN

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Parents and child stand and square off before a gym filled with each generations' peers. This is a Friday night open meeting at Straight Inc.

"Steve," says the father, "I want you to know how disgusted I am when I think of you on your knees in the mud, in the rain, huffing Freon out of the air conditioner." Straight, facing possible closure by Virginia health officials, is a tough, long-term treatment program for the addicted kid at the end of the line.

Some of the estimated 100 kids in the program are there by court order. Others arrive with exhausted parents who told them to get in the car, without saying where they were headed.

But Virginia state health officials are embroiled in efforts to revoke Straight's license for the second year in a row. While allegations of physical abuse made a year ago have been cleared, state officials say they are concerned about how host homes are monitored.

Host homes are the homes of client-families, where the kids in Straight stay during treatment.

State officials also say that 76 recent licensing violations, while corrected, show Straight has a history of disregard for state licensing, said Jacqueline Ennis, assistant commissioner on research, evaluation and data management for the state's Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation & Substance Abuse Services.

Recent violations ranged from broken toilets to poorly recording tuberculosis shots for staff, said Ms. Ennis.

Joy Margolis, Florida-based Straight's vice president of public relations, called the violations "bureaucratic in nature."

A hearing to see if Straight can retain its licenses -without going to court -has not been scheduled, said Ms. Ennis.

Meanwhile, newspaper articles also have alleged an incident of sexual abuse connected to the Springfield program, where about 10 Anne Arundel County families are under treatment.

The incident, which Ms. Margolis said state officials failed to prove, allegedly occurred in a host home.

"That was not because of Straight," said Karen [REDACTED], whose 17-yearold son Jamin recently graduated from the program. "That's because of our society. My son never had an incident or occurrence or anything like that happen. Do they close a public school down because one of the teachers molested a student?"

The [REDACTED], south county alumni of short-term treatment and special school programs, say Straight works because it's a long-term program where entire families are held accountable for a child's addiction, and counseled.

At times, up to 24 county families have been enrolled at Straight, according to Scott Gilbert, the Springfield program's resource development planner. Last fall, Straight closed the satellite office it had maintained for about a year on West Street in Annapolis. Mr. Gilbert said the program opens and closes such administrative offices as an area's population may require.

If the Springfield program closes, county families could be transferred to another East Coast Straight facility, said Mr. Gilbert. But, he said: "We're not anticipating a problem." At Straight, clients from 13 to 28 years of age work through five phases to sobriety. The program is based on the 12 steps, with emphasis on accepting a higher spirituality.

When a kid comes to Straight, he can count on doing nothing at first.

"All responsibility is taken away," said Mr. Gilbert. "They don't have to make their bed or decide what clothes to wear. All they have to do is decide how they wound up in a long-term treatment program."

During this time, the first of five treatment phases, an older member of the program, or oldcomer, accompanies the kid everywhere, even to the bathroom.

As his work through the five phases ensues, a client is drawn to look more deeply at himself in the protected womb of Straight. The goal is honesty.

Clients spend about six hours a day in group therapy, where their peers openly confront them if they're suspected of lying. Group breaks

for meals or exercise. They all live in the homes of other clients during phase one; they go home to live during phase two.

Until then, children only speak to their parents during open meetings, or in five-minute private talks earned as privileges for "working" the program.

At Straight, there's no dating. Girls have to pull their hair back; boys cut theirs. Nobody can wear heavy metal T-shirts or jewelry, or anything else "image-y." Kids wear rugby shirts or sweaters and jeans or slacks. They look wholesome.

The idea is to avoid the stereotypes or images that pulled an impressionable young person into a "druggie" peer group.

Eventually, a kid's weaned back into school or work, then out with friends, then, finally, to 12-step programs. After that, they graduate from the program.

Figuring that the family situation as a whole contributed to a child's addiction, siblings and parents are also in counseling at Straight.

"Addiction is a family disease," said Mr. Gilbert. "This is kids helping kids, and parents helping parents. We do not graduate kids. We graduate whole families."

"One of the key factors in this is, it's not your fault your kid used drugs," said Mrs. [REDACTED]. "But, what can you do in your life, today, to improve your life? What can you do differently now that you know what's going on?"

Kids work through Straight at their own pace, although the average stay is about a year to 14 months, say program officials. The cost, \$12,000-\$14,000 per year, is sometimes covered by insurance, said Ms. Margolis. The program boasts a 50 percent to 70 percent success rate, said Mr. Gilbert.

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