

# Drug Client Sues Straight Inc. Over 'Spit Therapy' Session

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The controversial drug treatment facility for teen-agers formerly located in Springfield, is under fire again, nearly two years after it closed its Backlick Road center under pressure from state officials.

This time the focus is "spit therapy," a form of punishment allegedly administered as part of the unorthodox center's treatment program.

█████ Beatty, a former client, is suing the Florida-based corporation for more than \$4 million in a lawsuit filed Tuesday in Fairfax County Circuit Court.

The suit claims Beatty was "viciously and cruelly assaulted" while enrolled in the program in the fall of 1991.

The assaults consisted of "spitting in the face of and yelling at ... ██████ Beatty, for approximately one hour with the desired goal to 'make the plaintiff come honest with his drug history,'" the suit stated.

The suit stated the abuse took place on a "near nightly basis" for more than 45 days and that Beatty was physically restrained in an apartment run by Straight officials while the abuse went on.

During one such session, one of Beatty's fingers was bent backward by another patient "to the point where ██████ Beatty feared his finger would break," the suit stated.

Beatty, who was 19 when the alleged abuse occurred, developed a disfiguring skin condition known as impetigo on his face as a result of the "spit therapy," the suit claimed. Doctors on the staff of Straight allegedly failed to diagnose or treat the condition, it stated.

Leila Kilgore, Beatty's attorney, described the treatment program at Straight as "bizarre and unorthodox."

"There's a bunch of cases" now pending against the center, she said, "and they're all just as nasty."

Beatty, who now lives in Pennsylvania, is asking for \$1 million in compensatory damages and \$3.5 million in punitive damages, claiming in the lawsuit that he suffered "severe emotional distress" and costly medical bills for his impetigo.

Straight Inc. opened its Springfield center in 1982 and closed it abruptly in July 1991, a day before the state Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services was to hold a hearing on its license. It enrolled about 100 participants.

Joy Margolis, spokeswoman for Straight Inc.'s national headquarters in St. Petersburg Beach, Fla., did not return phone calls yesterday. But a former Straight employee, who spoke on the condition he not be identified, defended the center's treatment.

"This program helped a great number of people," he said. "In a program ... that attempted to help people, there are going to be people that are dissatisfied, but there was nothing written in the procedures around intended abuse nor was there any intended abuse. You have to keep in mind that you're dealing with a difficult population to treat."

Reports of the use of "spit therapy" did come up in the state's investigation of Straight, said John Barrett, regional field supervisor for the Mental Health Department at the time of the investigation.

"Other clients would get real close to someone and start speaking to them," he said. "Depending on how you do it, you could be spitting on someone's face. There were numerous complaints regarding that."

Barrett said the majority of parents whose children were enrolled in the program ended up viewing it "on the negative side. A lot of parents said they felt like their kid was being punished."

From the standpoint of the state, Barrett said, Straight "did not conform to our regulations on treatment for adolescents." And, he added, "from a personal point of view it would not be a program I would want my children in."

The center's strict methods had been controversial since it opened. It had a history of state violations, including being cited for depriving clients of food and allowing clients to restrain others. A 1983 lawsuit by a 20-year-old former client who claimed he was kept in his home against his will resulted in a \$220,000 settlement.

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