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Disputed treatment center closes

RICHMOND (AP)—A private treatment center that used controversial mental and physical techniques to keep children from using drugs has stopped operating in Virginia.

Straight Inc. dropped its attempt to regain a Virginia operating license, choosing instead to transfer the program to nearby Columbia, Md., Straight Inc. spokeswoman Joy Margolis said.

The program houses clients with host families, usually parents of children already in treatment.

The program has until Aug. 6 to find new housing for its clients, the state agency that oversees the program said. The state will file suit against any host home still operating in Virginia after that date.

The program, which faced allegations of patient abuse, was to have a hearing on progress to correct state licensing violations today.

"They do not have a license to operate in Virginia as a result of waiving that hearing," said Jacqueline M. Ennis, assistant commissioner of the state Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services.

"We made sure they understood the ramifications of that decision," Ms. Ennis said.

Straight Inc.'s Springfield office closed Friday, the mental health department said.

The program had worked to correct several violations, including physical restraint of rebellious clients, but still faced problems in renewing its license, Ms. Ennis said.

The decade-old St. Petersburg, Fla.-based drug treatment program for adolescents has faced sharp criticism in several states. Straight Inc. operates in Florida, Georgia, Texas, Michigan and Massachusetts. The

Maryland office is the first in that state.

Ms. Margolis said 60 percent to 70 percent of patients do not return to drug use after participating in the program. Patients can spend a year or more in treatment.

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

Critics say the program's philosophy that includes breaking down patients' defenses about drug use can be dehumanizing.

Ms. Ennis cited the program's use of "spit therapy," where children could spit on one another as a way of reducing egos and the need for social acceptance. "We thought that was inappropriate," she said.

Virginia clients or their parents lodged dozens of complaints about the program in recent years, Ms. Ennis said.