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## Straight loses \$220,000 verdict to patient

The Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — A 20-year-old awarded \$220,000 in damages for being held against his will by a Straight Inc. facility in St. Petersburg says his victory sends the drug rehabilitation center a message.

"I think we set the precedent that's going to tell Straight that they can't lock people up anymore," said Fred Collins after the award by a U.S. District Court jury Wednesday.

Collins, of Fairfax, said the award tells Straight that "that they're not above the law . . . that they're held liable for their actions."

A Lakeland woman has filed a similar suit in Pinellas County, alleging tactics used by the rehabilitation center drove her son to a mental hospital.

Straight officials have called the allegations groundless.

In the Virginia case, the jury deliberated about three hours before returning the award in the suit brought against Straight by Collins, who had asked \$750,000 in damages.

The jury two weeks ago found that Collins was held against his will at Straight's St. Petersburg facility last June. Straight was exonerated of Collins' charge that he was physically and mentally abused.

Collins, who has denied ever having a drug habit, asked compensatory damages for loss of the family financial support for college and money to pay for psychiatric treatment for emotional problems coming from the treatment.

The jury awarded him \$40,000 in compensatory damages and \$180,000 in punitive damages.

Collins' attorney, Philip J. Hirschkop, on Wednesday urged the jury to assess large damages against Straight, arguing there was a pattern of illegal detention at the group's clinics in St. Petersburg and Springfield, near here.

"Kidnapping and false imprisonment are felonies," Hirschkop said. He also said Straight officials "repeatedly ignored Florida state law, locking people in rooms and threatening to commit others to mental institutions."

"Only a substantial monetary award would prevent them from continuing such policies," Hirschkop said.

Straight attorney Ronald Goldfarb called Collins a "con artist."

"He is no Patty Hearst or Bruce Laingen, held hostage by terrorists," Goldfarb said. "Straight tried to do right by this kid. Even if Collins is right, you can still award damages as low as a dollar," Goldfarb said.

Straight's national clinical director, Miller Newton, was shocked by the verdict.

"We are going to respect the decision about being careful about letting kids go and protecting their rights, but, I think, we're going to be forced to appeal this because, I think, the damages are way out of line," Newton said.

The verdict Wednesday came as about 100 parents and supporters of the Straight program demonstrated outside the courthouse in support of the organization.