

*Drug Rehabilitation Services  
Straight*

# State finds 'deficiencies' in Straight but can't prove any mistreatment

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State investigators have found "deficiencies" in Straight Inc., a St. Petersburg-based drug treatment program. But officials said Thursday that they could not prove allegations that Straight workers were mistreating some of their clients.

"I don't have proof that would stand up in court," one investigator said.

Straight has been given 90 days to comply with several corrective "recommendations" or face the possible loss of its state operating license.

During that period, officials with the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) will evaluate Straight to "decide whether or not the license should be renewed or revoked," said Robert G. Marshall, district administrator.

**AMONG OTHER** problems, the investigation found that Straight may have illegally held some clients against their will.

Straight is a nonprofit program that uses peer-pressure behavioral modification techniques on its clients, generally aged from 12 to 18.

It relies on a staff of former clients who have successfully completed treatment for their own drug problems. None of the staffers has college or professional degrees.

The special HRS task force was formed last month to investigate questions raised by a series of articles in *The St. Petersburg Times*. The articles quoted a youth who said he had been "beaten" during one treatment session, and they outlined complaints from several corporate directors who resigned to protest Straight's management.

Director Marshall said he believes that Straight's problems can be easily cured. He expressed confidence in the program, and said he would not hesitate enrolling a child of his were it necessary.

The HRS recommendations announced Thursday require Straight to:

- ✓ Make sure that no clients are held against their will, unless they have been ordered into the program by a judge.
- ✓ Make sure that the treatment staff understands that state law prohibits physically abusing a client.
- ✓ Hire a nutritionist to supervise client diets.

- ✓ Provide in-service staff training on how to deal with disruptive clients.

- ✓ Make sure personnel and program policies are in written form, and that staff members are frequently evaluated.

Since it opened in 1976, Straight has been granted two annual operating licenses, though it did not comply with several state regulations, director Marshall said.

"IT WAS because we didn't know (about the deficiencies)," said Barbara McPherson, an HRS attorney.

The official who issued those licenses — James Holley — also led the special task force.

The full HRS investigative report — detailing about 30 allegations and covering interviews with more than 100 persons — will remain secret because "it is replete with clients' names," Mrs. McPherson said.

The law requires that the names be kept confidential, unless Straight officials want to contest the "interim" status given their license. Should program officials appeal, the report will become public.

Melvin F. Sembler, Straight's board chairman, and board member Guy N. Perenich indicated that an appeal would not be filed.

The investigators also examined complaints that Helen R. Petermann, Straight's program director, mistreated at least one client and used abusive language. Again, they said they could not prove the mistreatment claims.

Straight officials said they do not plan to remove Mrs. Petermann or any other program employee.

"WHILE THERE are problems, this program is providing a real service," Mrs. McPherson said.

The program has treated 460 clients since opening, with 65 completing the program.

When Marshall announced the HRS findings at a morning press conference, a reporter asked why only one black juvenile has ever been enrolled in Straight.

Program officials said that they have sought to enroll more blacks, but have had problems attracting them.

Straight asks parents to "donate" from \$400 to \$550 per client, although officials say it is not required for admission.