

Statements in suit contrast with glowing report from HRS' last visit

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Sworn statements alleging physical and psychological harassment at Straight Inc. are in contrast to the latest inspection report issued by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

The state agency visits Straight annually at 3001 Gandy Blvd. to determine whether the program is complying with state laws regulating drug abuse treatment centers. After its annual visit last June, HRS gave Straight a glowing report and renewed the program's license for one year.

"Overall, the program is in very good shape and has complied with the department's request to correct deficiencies noted in other site visits," the report

stated.

"I'M GLAD we got differences between us and the monitoring staff resolved," said Miller Newton, Straight clinical director, referring to a previous HRS report that was critical of Straight's record keeping. "Every year we improve — not just in the things they monitor but in our therapeutic techniques, which they do not monitor."

But last month, allegations of mistreatment and abuse were lodged against Straight by several former clients and parents. Nearly a dozen affidavits have been signed supporting a lawsuit in U.S. District Court that charges Straight with "abusive treatment . . . false imprisonment, assault and intentional infliction of emotional distress." (Story at left.)

See HRS, 4-B

HRS from 1-B

One of the former clients, Leigh Bright, 15, of Springfield, Va., claims that Newton grabbed her by the hair in front of a group session last June and threw her on the floor after she refused to participate in the program. Newton then ordered Straight clients to "marathon" her, Miss Bright says. In response, Straight clients kept her awake and physically abused her for more than three days, she says.

The allegation, along with the others, has been denied under oath by Newton.*

Still, Miss Bright's mother isn't satisfied. Although HRS received a complaint from another parent about her daughter's treatment in June, Emily Bright says neither the state agency nor Straight ever contacted her to tell her about it. The first she heard about the allegation, Mrs. Bright says, was when she took her daughter out of Straight last November.

"YOU DON'T anticipate these days that you can put a child in a program and have to worry about her safety," says Mrs. Bright, who coordinates drug and alcohol abuse programs for the U.S. Army.

HRS Mental Health Supervisor Frankie Goldsby and Terry Harper, a former mental health specialist at HRS who monitored Straight for more than three years, declined to discuss the Bright case or any other Straight clients because of federal confidentiality laws.

Both agreed, however, that they would like to see licensing procedures for all drug programs tightened because they are too "vague."

"There are a lot of ambiguities that leave a great deal of room for interpretation," says Harper, who left HRS earlier this month to go into private mental health care in Pasco County.

EVEN SO, BOTH Harper and Mrs. Goldsby agree, HRS is limited to monitoring such things as staff training and basic treatment facilities. Complaints of child abuse are looked into by HRS, but possible criminal investigations are forwarded to the Pinellas-Pasco state attorney's office, they say.

Marcie Biddleman, child abuse specialist for HRS, wouldn't comment about Straight or Miss Bright's case because of federal laws that protect the confidentiality of clients treated in drug treatment centers.

But Harper says that he sent "three or four packets" of complaints involving allegations of abuse at Straight to the state attorney's office during the last three years and got no response.

The latest packet was mailed last summer, Harper said. In it was a four-page complaint filed by John [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] a Clearwater resident who withdrew his step-daughter Georgia from Straight in June after his daughter Ann, also in the program, had run away.

[REDACTED] **DAUGHTERS** told Harper last June of instances in which clients at Straight were kept awake for three-day periods, put on restricted diets of peanut-butter sandwiches and sat upon by other clients and pinched — "nitpicked" for hours at a time, according to a copy of the report obtained by the *St. Petersburg Times*.

Georgia also told Harper that she saw Newton grab Leigh Bright by her hair and throw her to the floor after she had refused to participate in group exercises. Newton "is (then) alleged to have told staff members to marathon her (Miss Bright) for three days," the report states. Georgia said she was picked from among other clients to participate in the marathon and did so for four hours.

The report, says Harper, was mailed to Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney James T. Russell in July. But neither Harper, nor the [REDACTED] family nor Miss Bright has ever heard from the state attorney's office, they say.

Russell could not be reached for comment Thursday, Friday or Saturday. Assistant State Attorney Louis Kwall, who runs the Office of Consumer Affairs in the state attorney's office and frequently investigates HRS complaints,

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— HRS report