

Drug Rehabilitation agencies Straight Inc



JAMES E. HARTZ
... heads Straight Inc.

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State health officials are investigating charges that several juveniles have been "beaten" and "slapped ... around" while enrolled in Pinellas County's newest drug-treatment program.

The examination of Straight Inc., a non-profit organization partly supported by federal funds, stems mainly from articles earlier this month in *The St. Petersburg Times*, officials said last week.

ANOTHER complaint was lodged by Pinellas school officials, who claimed that one of their students had been mistreated while at Straight, officials said.

If the charges are confirmed, Straight could lose its operating license, according to Bob Marshall, district director of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

"I think there's some doubt among some people (about Straight) because of the news articles, and we're obligated to clear the air one way or another," he said.

But after several days of investigation, Marshall said that so far "those allegations (of mistreatment) have not been substantiated at all.

"If my son needed to go into the Straight program I'd put him there right now," he said.

BASED IN A northwest St. Petersburg warehouse, Straight uses peer-pressure behavioral modification methods on juveniles from 12 to 18. Only those with admitted or suspected drug problems can enroll.

On several occasions, Pinellas County judges have ordered juveniles into Straight, rather than to jail.

Thus far, nearly 50 program clients have been questioned by state investigators, Marshall said.

But the officials have not finished interviewing six former corporate directors who resigned several months ago to protest Straight's treatment and management techniques.

Some of the directors have accused the program of violating state law. A former program volunteer also told *The Times* that she once witnessed Helen Peter-

mann, Straight's program director, kick a youth who was passively resisting counselors. Straight officials have denied the charges.

James E. Hartz, Straight's chief executive, declined to comment last week about the investigation.

"If there's one thing I've learned, it's that I'm not going to talk to a reporter over the telephone," he told *The Times*.

But Hartz also declined to meet personally with the reporter before this article was to be published.

ONE OF THE newspaper articles prompting the state's investigation quoted Jerry Wess, 17, of St. Petersburg. The youth claimed to have been "beaten and bruised" by six Straight counselors — all under 18 — during an intensive-treatment session unsupervised by any adult.

The youth also supplied *The Times* with a sworn statement outlining the incident and identifying the counselors involved.

Marshall said HRS officials may be unable to contact Wess, who reportedly has left Florida, before the investigation ends later this week.

"That's the kind of kid we need to trail (locate)," Marshall said. "He may be right."

Social service programs frequently are accused of mistreating clients, Marshall said. "Sometimes it's true, sometimes it's false." But the Straight investigation has not revealed "any serious situations that have alarmed us," he said.

"I'M TALKING about serious problems (such as physical mistreatment) that would make it such that children should not be in the program," Marshall said.

If any mistreatment reports are verified, he said, they will be referred to Pinellas-Pasco State Atty. James T. Russell for possible criminal prosecution.

The five-member investigative committee is led by James Holly, the drug program licensing official who has been overseeing Straight since it opened in the fall of 1976. The group will start compiling its report Tuesday. Marshall and Hartz are scheduled to meet Friday and review the findings.

12/18/77