

Fla. --

Class-action suit claims Straight Inc. abused patients

By ROCHELLE JONES
St. Petersburg Times Washington Bureau

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — Straight Inc., the controversial drug treatment program based in St. Petersburg, is being sued by a 20-year-old Virginia man who charges that he was held against his will and subjected to physical and psychological abuse.

The class-action suit, filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court here, seeks \$750,000 in damages for Fred Collins of Fairfax County and each of an unnamed number of individuals the suit claims were also forced to take part in Straight Inc.

The suit charges that those who were enrolled and who wanted to leave were knocked to the floor and physically restrained until they promised to stay. Such incidents occurred at least once a week, according to the suit.

Allegedly, those who refused to cooperate were fed a "prolonged diet" of water and peanut butter sandwiches,

and held up to two months in solitary confinement.

William Oliver, national executive director of Straight Inc., said he was "flying in the dark" when asked about the specifics of the suit. However, he said he was confident the suit, like a similar case in Atlanta, would be dismissed. "We're saying that our position will be vindicated in court," he said.

STRAIGHT INC. operates programs in five cities, including St. Petersburg and Sarasota. Some parents of drug-addicted children say the program has saved the children's lives, while others are sharply critical of the program's methods.

Nancy Reagan toured the St. Petersburg facility earlier this year.

The suit claims Straight Inc., through "false and malicious brainwashing techniques," convinced Collins' parents he was a "drug-crazed and worthless individual."

Collins says his strange story began in June when he went to St. Petersburg to visit his brother, who was in his

sixth month in the Straight Inc. program.

Collins said he was required to complete a questionnaire that asked about his use of drugs before being permitted to see his brother. Collins said in an interview that he had smoked marijuana "occasionally" but did not abuse drugs and was not dependent on them.

He said he was told by Straight Inc. employees he had a "chemical dependency." Collins said he was confined in a small room for three hours and denied permission to leave until he agreed to spend 14 days in the treatment program.

THE SUIT CLAIMS these "coercive, abusive techniques" are typical of Straight Inc. Collins' brother was isolated in an intake room 12 hours until he signed the admission forms.

Collins was watched 24 hours a day during his first three months in St. Petersburg. Another enrollee, known as an "oldcomer," held the loops of Collins' belt at all times. Collins was allowed to use a bathroom only with the permission of his oldcomer. At night his clothes were locked

up, and an alarm was set on his bedroom door so he couldn't leave.

Treatment consisted of 12-hour "rap sessions" with brief breaks for meals and exercise. According to the complaint, "Treatment often consisted of placing an individual before the group of approximately 350 people and subjecting him or her to verbal and physical abuse and harassment."

Collins lost 30 pounds. He said Thursday, "I was like a walking skeleton. I went around like a zombie."

ON OCT. 28, Collins and 100 other enrollees were transferred to a new Straight Inc. facility in Fairfax County. Along with other enrollees, he was locked up and guarded in his home by his parents, who were taking part in the program as foster parents. On Oct. 31, Collins threw a table through a bedroom window and escaped.

His father swore out a criminal warrant, charging his son with malicious destruction of property. The charge was dropped in exchange for \$75 in damages.