

WOMAN AWARDED \$721,000

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ST. PETERSBURG -- Jurors have awarded \$721,000 to a woman who claimed she was assaulted and held against her will by employees of a controversial drug treatment program.

Karen Norton fought back tears, hugged her lawyers and thanked the jury after Thursday's award -- the largest ever levied against Straight Inc. and \$55,000 more than her lawyers sought.

"At last someone listened to me," Norton, 25, said. "I'm happy. I waited a long time."

The 5-year-old civil suit said Norton was mocked and humiliated by Straight employees and was forced to remain in the program -- where relatives had placed her -- despite repeated pleas to leave.

She charged she was thrown against a wall by the program's assistant director, strip-searched and jeered by staffers, intimidated, bruised, cursed and forced to exercise despite complaining she was in pain.

Straight attorney William Rutger told jurors that confrontation was essential for effective drug treatment.

"What we were really against, basically, was that she was 18 years old and that she was not permitted to leave," said Katherine Haynes, a member of the three-man, three-woman jury.

The panel awarded Norton \$106,000 in compensatory damages and \$615,000 in punitive damages for her 17-month treatment.

Senior Judge Joseph McNulty told jurors their verdict was "certainly justified by the evidence."

Straight spokeswoman Joy Margolis said the organization would appeal the award.

"The compensatory damages were excessive and the punitive damages were inexcusable," she said, and that the dispute involved incidents eight years ago. "Straight is a completely different organization from what we were then."

The national program, founded in 1972, is based in St. Petersburg.

Straight has agreed to pay tens of thousands of dollars in settlements to other former patients who complained of being held by Straight against their will.

One former patient was awarded \$220,000 in 1983 in a federal lawsuit.

In 1984, Straight officials were warned by the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services to stop coercing teen-agers into drug treatment or risk losing their state license.

Last year, Straight's license to operate was renewed by HRS for three months instead of the year.

But the license has since been renewed twice for a full year, HRS district spokeswoman Elaine Fulton-Jones said.

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