

DRUG CENTER LOSES SUIT OVER TACTICS

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Jurors 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 against Straight Inc. and \$55,000 more than her lawyers sought.

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

The 5-year-old civil suit claimed 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 up 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.

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

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

"The compensatory damages were excessive and the punitive damages were inexcusable," she said, noting 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 headquartered in St. Petersburg.

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

Last year, Straight's license to operate in Florida was renewed by HRS for three months instead of the customary year. HRS cited a state report that patients had only limited access to an abuse hot line, bathroom privileges were restricted and some records were sloppy or incomplete.

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

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