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Straight Inc. sues state for right to force teen-agers into treatment

By HELEN HUNTLEY
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Straight Inc., a controversial St. Petersburg drug-treatment program, filed suit against the state Monday in an attempt to win the legal right to force teen-agers into treatment.

Last year the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) ordered Straight to stop holding young people involuntarily or risk losing its license.

"We want to reaffirm parental authority . . . absent abuse, neglect or abandonment," said William D. Oliver, Straight's executive director. "We don't think we violate the civil rights of children. We think we protect the civil rights of children."

STRAIGHT'S SUIT against HRS is an attempt to clarify a state law regulating drug treatment for minors. The suit asks the Leon County Circuit Court to rule that under state law young people have no authority to override a parental decision to send them to Straight for drug treatment.

HRS takes the position that the law requires parents to obtain a court order if they want to force their children to receive treatment against their will.

"They either need to want treatment or they need to need it," said HRS lawyer Barbara McPherson. "They should either be there voluntarily or it should be established by a court of law that they need the program."

She said children need some legal protection because parents, no matter how well-meaning, can make mistakes.

"Straight stands alone among the drug-abuse treatment centers in the state with its interpretation (of the law)," she said.

OLIVER SAID the requirement for a court order makes it too difficult and expensive for parents to get treatment for children who don't want it. He said parents shouldn't have to wait until their children are obviously addicted before forcing them to get help.

"If my child needs brain surgery . . . if I believe that's necessary and the doctor agrees to that, that's done and there's no court order," Oliver said. He said drug abuse is as life-threatening as many diseases.

However, HRS officials claim that Straight has been overzealous in its rush to push children into treatment.

An HRS investigation last year found Straight holding teen-agers involuntarily and coercing or tricking them into consenting to treatment. HRS investigators also claimed that Straight officials abused some of the clients



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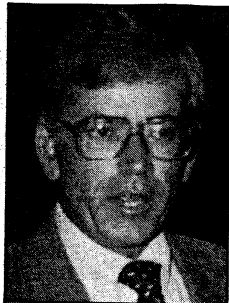
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in their program. One result of the investigation is that Straight now must inform those who enroll of their right to leave the program.

About 10 percent of the children who are brought to Straight's St. Petersburg center by their parents are not treated because they won't consent to the program, said center director Randolph E. Ratliff.

He said the parents of about 15 of those teen-agers have taken them to other states where children don't have to consent to treatment.

PARENTS OF two of those teen-agers, who are now enrolled in a Straight center in Virginia, appeared at a press conference Monday to tell of the hardship the HRS stand has caused them.



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"The state is trying to tell us we don't have the right to determine what is the right treatment for our son," complained one mother, Kathy Kramer. "We do not feel comfortable bringing him back to the State of Florida the way the laws are now."

One group of parents who have had children in the Straight program is promoting an amendment to the state law that would remove any question about the parent's right to force a child into treatment.

The organization, which calls itself Mothers Organized Movement for Parents Rights, is not connected with Straight, Ratliff said.

The group's proposal would allow involuntary commitment to a treatment center by a parent if an independent evaluator agreed treatment was necessary.