

Straight tells staff not to talk

Rehabilitation agencies
Chief **'I do feel like it (warning) is to quiet us up and frighten the parents on the program,' says Carolyn Henson, former Straight volunteer.**

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Straight Inc. has sent letters to its current and former employees warning them not to reveal information about the drug treatment program because doing so could violate state confidentiality laws.

The letter also went to parents who have children enrolled in the program.

Some recipients say they believe the letter is meant to intimidate them from speaking out about Straight, which is under investigation by state health officials.

"IT HAS RECENTLY come to our attention that some of our past employees and-or directors have been releasing information about the treatment and identity of some of the persons treated at our Center," wrote James E. Hartz, Straight's executive director.

Should program officials learn of potential violations, Hartz wrote, "Straight Inc. shall do what it deems necessary to protect its best interests."

"I think they (Straight officials) are just trying to keep people quiet, because they don't want it to come out, what's going on over there," said one parent who asked not to be identified.

The letter is dated Feb. 10 — two days after Hartz was interviewed by *The St. Petersburg Times* concerning allegedly coercive and possibly illegal tactics used on Straight's juvenile clients.

The interview was reported in a copyrighted article that appeared last Sunday in *The Times* and quoted several sources, including unnamed former program counselors.

Hartz was unavailable for comment on the letter.

Based in a warehouse just north of St. Petersburg, Straight uses peer pressure and behavioral modification techniques on juveniles from 12 to 18.

Last December state officials who oversee the program's operating license began to investigate complaints that some Straight clients had been mistreated.

THE INVESTIGATORS ultimately said they could not prove any mistreatment charges. But they scolded Straight for apparently holding some clients against their will in violation of another state law.

In the letter, Hartz quoted portions of the confidentiality statute, which prohibits drug program employees or volunteers from revealing a client's name "except in a proceeding involving the question of licensure."

"I do feel like it (the letter) is to quiet us up and frighten the parents on the program," said Carolyn Henson, a former Straight volunteer.

"I think it's to keep them (parents or employees) from bringing their complaints to HRS or the newspaper or anyone else," she said.