

Health officials give Straight conditional approval, say runaway girl wants to stay

Drug Rehab Center Straight

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

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State health officials cannot prove charges that an 18-year-old girl was held illegally at the Straight Inc. drug treatment program, a spokesman for the State Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) said Wednesday.

The girl has told investigators that she wants to remain at Straight, even though she twice tried to run away.

Three weeks ago a group of Largo residents said they saw the girl run from a Straight foster home at about 7:30 one morning, wearing only a robe, slippers and blue jeans. She was captured by Straight counselors minutes later after telephoning her sister from a neighboring house.

THE GIRL THEN was returned to Straight's Park Street headquarters, just north of St. Petersburg. Her parents were called and they convinced her to remain, Straight officials have said.

State law prohibits drug treatment programs from holding juveniles against their will.

Officials declined to identify the girl by name. But at a parents' meeting a few days after the incident, a slight, blond girl who identified herself as Gail [redacted] said she had tried to run away, but now wanted to remain at Straight.

Brenda [redacted] — who identified herself as the girl's sister and said she lives away from her parents — reacted skeptically to the investigation results.

"They (Straight) won't let me see her," said Miss [redacted]. "I'm gonna try somehow to see her and let her tell me to my face that she wants to stay there. They (Gail's parents) told her once that if she left they'd get a court order to put her back in the program.

Last December, HRS began investigating other charges against the nonprofit program, which uses peer-pressure, behavior-modification treatments on juveniles from 12 to 18.

INVESTIGATORS FOUND that Straight may have illegally held some clients against their will. They also gave the program a 90-day conditional license, rather than a normal one-year license. Officials with HRS, however, declined to release their full investigative report.

The parents of many Straight clients praise the program and say it has cured their children of drug abuse. The program also has won the backing of many law enforcement and juvenile court officials, including Circuit Judge Jack Dadswell, who has ordered many youths into Straight as an alternative to jail.

In a copyrighted article earlier this month, *The St. Petersburg Times* quoted several former Straight counselors who charged that the program used a variety of coercive tactics to control clients.

The runaway girl's statement to HRS closes that portion of its Straight investigation, the spokesman said. However, officials will continue to monitor the program through April, when they must decide whether to renew or revoke Straight's license.