

This pertains to my daughter 2-3-78

Local

Girl forced to return to a Straight foster home, neighbors say

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM
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A new complaint that the Straight Inc. drug program may be holding juveniles against their will was filed with state officials Thursday by a group of mid-Pinellas County homeowners.

A girl, about 16 and wearing only a robe, slippers and blue jeans, apparently tried to run away from one of Straight's foster homes near Largo about 7:30 a.m. Wednesday, the residents told state officials.

RESIDENTS SAID the girl went to a neighbor's house and asked to use the telephone. But as several persons watched, she was physically apprehended by two other girls from Straight before she could complete the call.

"It happened so fast, they were after her in a flash," said Thelma Thomas, of [redacted].

"She was so frightened. . . I think she was trying to get away, she kept telling her sister on the phone to hurry."

"She appeared scared," Mrs. Thomas said.

The two girls who chased the apparent runaway ran uninvited through the Thomas house, said Mrs. Thomas' husband Fisher.

After they caught the her, the two girls from Straight held her by the arms and walked her back to the foster home.

A COMPLAINT was lodged Thursday with the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS), which oversees drug treatment programs. The witnesses were represented by the Suburban Estates Home Owners Association, and attorney Janice F. Beers.

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— James E. Hartz,
Straight director



The new allegations against Straight come only two weeks after HRS scolded the program's directors for apparently detaining some clients illegally in the past.

State law prohibits a drug treatment program from holding a juvenile against his will, unless a judge has ordered it.

HRS officials said the Thomases and other witnesses are prepared to recount the event in sworn statements to Pinellas-Pasco State Atty. James T. Russell if a criminal investigation is called for.

Association members also told HRS that within the past few months they have seen "young teenaged girls who were allegedly handcuffed together" enter the Straight foster home, Beers said.

Barbara McPherson, an HRS attorney, confirmed that the agency is investigating both charges.

But James E. Hartz, Straight's program director, said the incident with the girl was not what it may have appeared to be.

"I SUPPOSE what those people saw, they saw," he said. "A girl, from what I understand, did leave a home unauthorized."

Once the girl was returned to Straight's headquarters, a warehouse just north of St. Petersburg, her par-

ents were notified that she wanted to leave the drug program, he said. The parents drove to Straight and convinced the girl to remain, he said.

"There was no strong-arm," said Hartz. "They (the girls who caught the alleged runaway) were supposedly concerned about where she was going."

He said the girl was not enrolled at Straight on a court order, as some clients are. Although she was free to leave, he said, "We like a minor to leave the program with his or her parents, because we feel responsible for the minor," he said.

Twelve-hours-a-day, about 200 clients ranging in age from 12 to 18 undergo peer-pressure behavioral modification treatments at Straight.

AT NIGHT, some juveniles — those in advanced stages of treatment — return home. But the others are placed in private homes supervised by volunteer parents who also have children enrolled at Straight.

It was one of those homes — which Straight officials refer to as "foster homes" — that the girl allegedly ran away from Wednesday.

Beers said neighbors have complained about the home in the past.

Hartz issued a blanket invitation to any home association members who would like to discuss their complaints against Straight with him.