

# Georgia suit: Straight Inc. illegally detaining 5

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Straight Inc., a Pinellas County-based drug treatment program due to be visited by Nancy Reagan later this month, has been sued by a civil liberties group in Atlanta for allegedly operating in Georgia without a state license and illegally detaining five teen-agers.

According to *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, the suit, filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), claims that five teen-agers at Straight's recently opened branch in Marietta, Ga. "are being held by an unlicensed organization in violation of the law" and are "in immediate danger to their physical and mental health." The suit was filed last Friday in Cobb County Superior Court by ACLU attorney Kathleen Wilde.

Straight opened its branch in Marietta — a suburb of Atlanta — six months ago but has yet to receive its required license from Georgia's Department of Human Resources (DHR), the suit claims. The DHR is responsible for overseeing social welfare programs in Georgia.

**ASKED ABOUT** the suit by *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* reporters Saturday, Straight's executive director in Marietta, Dave Tilley, responded, "We are going to come under the auspices of the DHR. That is our

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# Straight

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intention and our desire.”

Contacted by *The St. Petersburg Times* Tuesday night, Tilley said that Straight was told last April by the Georgia DHR that it could open and operate “for a period of time” without a state license.

“It was not necessary for us to have one initially, the day we opened, as long as we were in the process of getting a license,” Tilley said.

However, Straight, which treats about 160 teen-agers at the Marietta center, did not apply for a state license until Monday, after news accounts in Atlanta reported that the center was being sued for operating without the license. According to Tilley, the application was delayed

because ongoing discussions and written correspondence between Straight and the DHR were not complete. Initially, Tilley said, “there was even some question that we would need a license.”

**THE ACLU** filed the suit after a former client from the Marietta center complained of “child abuse” at Straight, referring to the center as a “hell hole,” according to *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. The youth named the five teen-agers allegedly being held against their will by Straight.

During its six years of operation in Pinellas County, Straight has been criticized for reportedly using heavy-handed pressure tactics to enroll teen-agers in the program and keep them there.

Complaints by former clients and counselors have charged the organization with physically detaining teen-agers, using fake “police” documents, falsifying treatment records and inflicting physical and mental abuse.

But the center has also been hailed by community leaders and nationally known drug rehabilitation experts as a model drug treatment program.

With its newly opened center in Marietta and another in Cincinnati, Straight has begun to attract national attention.

Mrs. Reagan, who has a special interest in programs aimed at youthful drug abuse, is scheduled to visit Straight in Pinellas County and an unrelated St. Petersburg drug prevention program for younger adolescents Feb. 15.