

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

FEB 4 '78

The leader of a St. Petersburg counseling group endorsed Straight Inc. Friday and accused state officials of investigating the juvenile drug-treatment program out of selfish motives.

Rev. Robert L. Askew, an Episcopal minister who presides over Parents Associated Inc., said he has never seen Straight officials mistreat clients, as some persons have charged.

ASKEW SAID HE WAS particularly disturbed when some Pinellas County homeowners Thursday said that a young girl had tried to run away from a Straight foster home, but was chased and caught by two other girls.

The residents complained about the incident to the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS), which has been investigating similar allegations against Straight.

Some of the residents also told HRS that they have seen teenagers in handcuffs being escorted into the foster home.

"I DO NOT ACCEPT for a moment that this child (the alleged runaway) was taken by force" and held against her will by Straight, as state law forbids, Askew said.

The allegation about the handcuffs, he said, "is just totally unreasonable and far-fetched."

Askew's parents organization was formed last September. It currently has no members other than the nine persons who sit as corporate directors. Among them are St. Petersburg Police Chief

Mack M. Vines, Pinellas County Circuit Judge Jack Dadswell and Askew's wife Elizabeth.

"HRS is basically using this situation at Straight to raise its own credibility in this community," Askew charged.

HE SAID ROBERT G. Marshall, HRS district director, recently said "that HRS has sub-zero credibility in this community. Now, he said a mouthful when he said it, and I agree with him 100 per cent."

"I cannot say that Mr. Marshall has improperly handled the investigation," Askew continued. But "from what I read in the papers . . . I would say that my antennae are up and I very strongly suspect that Mr. Marshall is doing that . . . is improperly handling the investigation."

Without mentioning any other names, Askew criticized "a very liberal segment of HRS that's very influential. They aren't concerned about what I would consider the proper things in dealing with juvenile misbehavior."

REACHED IN TALLAHASSEE, Marshall said HRS is investigating Straight "for a very sincere reason . . . there was concern expressed about the safety of children (in the program)."

HRS began examining Straight after a series of articles in *The St. Petersburg Times* quoted a youth who claimed to have been beaten while enrolled there. While they were unable to prove any mistreatment allegations, state investigators found that Straight apparently had held some clients against their will, in violation of the law.

Askew also criticized that law.

"If the parent doesn't have the authority to say to the child, 'you will go to that program,' what else, what other recourse does the parent have other than just to let the teenager run wild?"

"SOMETIMES HRS, THE system, works and aids and abets delinquency and drug abuse," he said.

Parents can obtain "involuntary commitment" orders from a judge, but Askew commented, "how much litigation is this going to cause between parents and children?"

"I don't want to start an investigation of HRS, I'm not trying to trigger one off," he said. "But I'd be very interested in knowing what the various individuals in the community" think about HRS.

He urges persons with complaints about HRS to write him at P.O. Box 1581, St. Petersburg, 33731, or telephone 823-5746.

"I DON'T HAVE ANY qualms about putting a child in the Straight program," Askew said. "I think that the Straight program is one of the most effective drug programs we have in the state."

"I, as President of Parents Associated, would not send a child out there if I thought in any way that any of this type of thing was going on."

"All I see out there is a lot of love and concern for a bunch of teenagers that need help," he said. FEB 4 '78