

local

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— Melvin F. Sembler, Straight board president

Straight evaluates its top officials, rates them highly

■ *Straight Inc. is a drug treatment program in Pinellas County that uses peer pressure and behavioral modification techniques on juveniles 12 to 18 years old. In recent months it has been under investigation by state health and administrative officials.* ■

By WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

Two top officials of Straight Inc. have received glowing endorsements from the drug program's governing board, despite the board's finding that errors have been committed.

Executive Director James E. Hartz "is doing a good job," and Staff Supervisor Helen R. Petermann is "a mainstay of strength" in the program, a board report states.

Though the evaluations are overwhelmingly positive, the report indicates that Hartz has been weak in administrative areas, and it acknowledges that Mrs. Petermann once struck an "hysterical and out-of-control" program client.

The board excuses those criticisms as being minor.

"WE DO NOT condone that action from Mrs. Petermann, but it is not such a severe infraction that would create (her) severance," Board President Melvin F. Sembler said last week.

"Helen did not think it was an infraction at the time," he said. "These (clients) are people who are on drugs, and because of that they are not normal."

Hartz and Mrs. Petermann have been at the core of allegations of mismanagement and mistreatment recently leveled by former Straight clients, counselors, board members and parents.

Those allegations have prompted three state investigations into Straight, including an investigation by Pinellas-Pasco State Atty. James T. Russell of possible criminal misconduct and an investigation into Straight's use of a \$50,000 federal grant. The grant recently was suspended until the investigation is finished.

THE BOARD'S REPORT indicates that Hartz needs a better grasp of financial and administrative matters. The 29-year-old psychologist has not dealt with "recalcitrant clients" as well as he has with program parents.

Many parents of Straight clients are pleased with the program's operation. Straight also has strong support from law enforcement and court officials in Pinellas County.

"The (board) feels that some of his methods of implementation (of board policy) were not successful. However, he (Hartz) showed the ability to recognize unsuccessful methods and move in a more positive direction."

Hartz also needs help handling Straight's "public relations," Sembler said. So, for the time being, Sembler is acting as program spokesman. "He (Hartz) had some quotes (in newspaper articles) that just sort of surprised us."

MRS. PETERMANN, the board said, "is admired by clients and parents alike.

"Mrs. Petermann states that she does not believe in the use of force and only slapped one person; that particular person was hysterical and out of control.

"She states that she had wrapped two persons in a blanket who (were) too aggressive to handle. She is strict, but fair."

In his own review of Mrs. Petermann's conduct, Hartz writes, "She has made mistakes with kids, but not of the frequency or intensity to be alarming.

"Generally, her dealing with kids is very acceptable and within ethical standards that I'm aware of."

Because of her work at Straight, Mrs. Petermann recently was given the Service to Mankind Award by the Northeast Sertoma Club, said Sembler.

TWO FORMER Straight counselors have told *The St. Petersburg Times* that they once saw Mrs. Petermann repeatedly slap a young program client. Another program volunteer claims to once have seen the woman kick a youth.

Hartz steadfastly denied the allegations before they were published. But Sembler said that was because "he was not aware of it (the slapping incident) at the time." The board report makes no mention of the alleged kicking incident.

The 56-year-old Mrs. Petermann lacks a high school education but has "3½ years experience in a drug program," says the report. She has read "a number of books that help in her work" including *I'm OK — You're OK*, *Primal Scream*, *Games People Play*, *Passages*, *Your Erroneous Zones*, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, *Psychology — An Introduction* and *We Mainline Dreams*.

After finding that Straight may have illegally held some juvenile clients against their will, the State Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) downgraded Straight's one-year operating license to an interim 90-day term.

ON TUESDAY, HRS officials say they plan to announce whether the license will be revoked, fully restored or continued for another interim period.

Because HRS told Straight to give its counselors more training, Sembler said the board has hired 28-year-old psychologist George R. Ross. He is working toward a doctorate at the University of South Florida and was an unsuccessful candidate for the Hillsborough County School Board in 1976.

Earlier program plans said Hartz would conduct all necessary in-service counselor training. (Straight relies on mostly teenage counselors who themselves have overcome past drug experiences. Hartz is the only degree-holding professional to regularly work with the program's 200 clients.)

But Hartz has been too overworked to conduct the training, Sembler said. "We hope that this will be working out so that (Ross) will relieve some of the workload off Hartz."

Sembler said he soon expects to receive an evaluation of the entire Straight program conducted by Jack Sarmanian, a Boston psychologist. That evaluation is required under the guidelines for the federal grant.