

Sarasota.

Sarasota, Pinellas investigating Straight Inc.

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State prosecutors in Sarasota have been investigating charges of criminal abuse for more than a year at Straight Inc. — the nationally acclaimed drug treatment program based in St. Petersburg — because of sworn statements made by former clients, parents and staff members about the program's Sarasota branch.

And in Pinellas County, Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney James T. Russell revealed last week that his office also has been investigating complaints of abuse at Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters because of possible criminal violations.

"I probably have a very thick (file)," said Russell. Asked to elaborate, Russell said, "I have an active file on Straight in Pinellas County" and refused to comment further.

Neither state attorney has filed criminal charges against the private, nonprofit drug treatment center. But Sarasota State Attorney James A. Gardner has handed over more than two-dozen sworn statements taken from parents, former clients and staff members at Straight's Sarasota branch to the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

THE STATE AGENCY, which is responsible for licensing and monitoring drug abuse programs, has ordered Straight to either agree to a list of corrective measures or produce its own list by Friday. Unless an agreement is reached, Straight could lose its state license to operate in Sarasota, said Robert J. Constantine, HRS district administrator in Fort Myers.

State Attorney Gardner, however, was more emphatic.

"If the problem continues, that's the

More than two dozen sworn statements charging criminal abuse at the Sarasota branch of the nationally acclaimed drug treatment program have been handed over to a state agency.

end of the program (in Sarasota)," Gardner said. "If HRS doesn't end it, I'm going to do what I can civilly and criminally to see that the (state laws) are followed."

Straight executive director William D. Oliver replied that he had not seen any of the specific allegations against the program but added that Straight policy does not tolerate the abuses that have been alleged in the Sarasota investigation.

"My answer to that is we're not getting into an adversary relation with either the state's attorneys or HRS on these issues," said Oliver. "We agree that those allegations shouldn't happen, the incidents alleged in those reports shouldn't happen. . . . I'm not getting into a debating contest with anybody about the truth or falsity of those statements. . . . We agree those aren't valid policies or practices."

BOTH THE HRS office in Fort Myers, which monitors Straight's Sarasota program, and the Sarasota State Attorney's Office have declined to release the sworn statements, either to the *St. Petersburg Times* or to Straight because the statements are still part of an active investigation. But HRS broke down the complaints into 27 major categories and mailed a synopsis of them both to Straight and the *Times* last week.

See STRAIGHT, 8-B

Straight

from 1-B

The complaints were lodged by the former clients involved or former clients, parents and staff members who have said they witnessed the incidents, according to the Sarasota State Attorney's Office. Among other things, the complaints charge that Straight committed the following abuses at its Sarasota branch:

- ✓ Held clients against their will, according to 11 clients and five staff members.
- ✓ Subjected clients to physical force, "including, but not limited to, hair pulling, kicking, hitting, biting and being sat upon by others," according to 13 clients, five staff members and three parents.
- ✓ Admitted clients "who were totally uninvolved or only marginally involved with drug abuse," according to six clients, four staff members and three parents. This complaint refers to Straight's written policy of requiring families with one child in the program to either enroll their other children who have used drugs or cut them off from all financial and emotional support.
- ✓ Confined clients in isolated "time-out" rooms for periods ranging from "hours to days," according to one client and two staff members.
- ✓ Locked clients in "foster homes" at night, according to 11 clients, four staff members and three parents.
- ✓ Denied food as a form of punishment, according to three clients and one parent. The report does not say how long food was denied to clients.
- ✓ Forced clients to clean out toilet bowls with their hands, according to one client.
- ✓ Required forced exercise that resulted in illness, according to one client, one staff member and one parent.
- ✓ Threatened to slow clients' progress in the program if they gave negative accounts of their experiences at Straight to HRS inspectors, according to two clients.
- ✓ Threatened staff members "if they wanted to quit," according to two staff members.

Many of the complaints are not new. In sworn statements filed in federal court last December as part of an unrelated, civil lawsuit against Straight Inc., former clients and their parents told of abuses at Straight's St. Petersburg branch said to be practiced by both Straight clients and Straight staff members. The statements claim instances of beatings, forced sleep deprivation, poor medical treatment, isolated confinement for days at a time, restricted diets and physical and mental harassment.

Those allegations, made under oath in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Va., are part of a lawsuit filed by former Straight client Fred Collins. The 20-year-old former engineering student says he was held against his will in Straight branches in St. Petersburg and Virginia for five months last year. He ran away from the program last November.

Collins' suit, which is expected to go to trial May 9, asks for \$750,000 in punitive damages and a declaratory judgment against what it describes as "abusive treatment . . . false imprisonment, assault and intentional infliction of emotional distress."

COLLINS ORIGINALLY filed his suit as a class action to represent all of Straight's past and present clients. That portion of the suit was thrown out in January, and the suit now involves only Collins. Friday, attorneys for both Collins and Straight argued for summary judgments in their favor. Both motions were denied.

Collins' suit and the Sarasota state attorney's investigation contain some of the most damaging and expensive allegations ever lodged against Straight during its controversial, six-year history in Pinellas County. Straight has already spent \$140,000 in legal fees defending itself against the Collins suit, according to executive director Oliver. Both developments have come just as the program has begun to enjoy national acclaim for its "kids-helping-kids" approach to drug abuse treatment.

Nancy Reagan visited Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters last year and wept as teen-agers stood before her and related the horrors of their drug abuse.

executive director of Faberge Inc., the cosmetics manufacturer, joined Straight's national board of directors last summer. He is expected to become chairman of Straight's soon-to-be-created National Board of Governors.

NEXT MONTH, Barrie will be honorary chairman at a charity tribute to Elizabeth Taylor in New York. One-third of the proceeds — more than \$25,000 — is expected to go to Straight, which by the end of 1986 plans to raise \$1.2-million and open 26 new branches nationwide.

The program claims that more than 50 percent of its clients graduate successfully and abstain from all drug and alcohol use.

"We can change the program to reduce the pressure," said executive director Oliver. "But we believe we have something that works for a lot of people."

Aside from the St. Petersburg and Sarasota centers, Straight now has branches in Atlanta, Cincinnati, and Virginia. It plans to open a sixth branch this summer in Orlando, Oliver said.

Oliver conceded, however, that Straight is experiencing growing pains and that the program is concerned about being able to attract enough qualified staff members to meet its needs.

"ONE OF THE THINGS that concerns me and concerns us as we open these branches is can we supervise these branches effectively?" Oliver said. "Until we have assurances within our own selves that we can consistently deliver the therapy and manage the program, we're not going to make the decision to open another branch."

"We've got to catch up with ourselves. This organization has grown from one program in St. Petersburg (six) years ago with, say, 300 clients, to five programs with over 800 clients."

Oliver added that Straight's plans to expand will continue, but that the program is making a stronger effort to attract new staff members.

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— Straight clinical director Miller Newton

Both Oliver and Straight's national clinical director Miller Newton said they couldn't respond to specific complaints against the Sarasota branch because they have not seen the sworn statements. But both said that the abuses outlined in the complaints are "totally against Straight policies."

Newton attributes the problems at Straight's Sarasota branch to its previous director — Hugh Burns, a former Sarasota County high school principal. Burns was fired by Newton last December and replaced by Chris Yarnold, a former Catholic priest who joined Straight in August 1981.

"I'm saying we had a management problem," Newton said during a telephone interview Friday from Omaha, Neb., where he was attending a conference on drug abuse. "It (the Sarasota branch) simply was not following the guidelines from St. Petersburg. It was taking its own independent course. . . ."

"WE KNEW WE had a problem, but we didn't know we had all that stuff. I'm not saying it happened or it didn't happen because we haven't seen the (sworn statements). . . . But it's not happening now and it's not going to happen. . . ."

"As far as I know, everything is going on fine down here," Yarnold added Friday. "I have no problems."

Burns counters that Newton fired him because he hired staff members without Newton's authorization and that he was thought to be too independent of Newton's control. If anything, Burns added, he had a reputation for being "too caring and too gentle" while at Straight.

"I think it changed diametrically after I left," Burns said. "Some of the things (notably, incidents of pushing and shoving) occurred while I was there. But the procedures we were told to emulate were those used in the St. Petersburg program. . . . All of the directors were trained in St. Petersburg under Newton. . . . Since I left, things got more militaristic, more authoritarian. . . . Things got worse."

State Attorney Gardner also is not satisfied that Straight's problems in Sarasota are over because of the change in management.

"Obviously, I'm not satisfied or I would have closed the book on it," said Gardner.

GARDNER SAID that he turned over his investigation to HRS because he thought it would be more effective in helping Straight "reach a long-term understanding of Florida statutes and HRS rules. . . ."

"My opinion is that I'm more effective if I do it this way," Gardner added. "Sure, I could have prosecuted a couple of juveniles (staff members), but they'd get counseled or warned by the courts. There would be no confinement or fine or any long-term effect."

Gardner said his major concern is "that many clients don't understand that they can leave the program when they want to leave it."

"That is a matter that I want to see resolved," Gardner said. "I make no value judgment about whether you can operate a (drug treatment) program if people can leave. . . . Maybe I'm bending over backwards, but I don't see anything wrong with telling someone that they can get out of a program if they want it. . . . That is the law. . . . There is a difference between saying, 'I want to be helped,' and almost being jailed."