

Controversial drug program seeks money for expansion

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CLEARWATER — Straight Inc., the controversial Pinellas-based drug treatment program for adolescents, is kicking off a local and national fund-raising drive to foot the bill for rapid expansion.

Locally, Straight wants to raise \$400,000 this year, said Maryellen Alexander, the program's information and education coordinator. The money will help pay for an \$800,000 "National Development and Training Center" to be built this year at Straight's headquarters on Gandy Boulevard.

By the end of 1986, Ms. Alexander added, Straight wants to raise \$1.2-million and open 26 new branches nationwide.

STRAIGHT, A PRIVATE, nonprofit drug treatment program, got national media attention in February when Nancy Reagan visited the center here while on a two-day tour of drug treatment and prevention programs. Since then, Straight has been featured in this month's *Reader's Digest* and in a segment of *NBC Magazine* that was broadcast Saturday.

"Nancy Reagan's visit certainly has gotten us a lot of interested people from all over," Ms. Alexander said. Information about Straight formerly spread by word of mouth, usually by persons with friends and relatives being treated at the program, said Ms. Alexander.

But now, she added, inquiries are being mailed from as far away as California. And a surprising number of those writing are friends of teen-agers with drug problems. Ms. Alexander said, not just concerned parents.

Straight's controversial therapy involves intense peer pressure that is intended to change the thinking and behavior of its teen-age clients. The teen-agers are separated from their friends and families for varying lengths of time during which they are taught to abandon the values and lifestyles commonly associated with drug abuse. The program, which critics label brainwashing, teaches its clients to adopt the "values, rules and behavior of the main culture."

SUPPORTERS OF THE program claim Straight has worked miracles for children who have developed drug dependencies. Last year Straight opened branches in Cincinnati and Atlanta.

A suit was filed against Straight in February by the American Civil Liberties Union in Atlanta. The suit alleged that five clients at the program were being held against

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their will and were in "immediate danger of their physical and mental health." But that suit has since been settled out of court.

The settlement calls for an independent three-member panel to investigate the program. A report on its findings is due in about two weeks, ACLU attorney Kathleen Wilde said Monday.

This year Straight expects to open four branches, including one in Orlando and another in northern Virginia. In addition, Straight wants to open 10 branches by 1985 and another 12 by 1987, Ms. Alexander said.

MEANWHILE, THE PROGRAM hopes to meet some of its demand by building the development and training center at its headquarters here, Ms. Alexander said.

The training center will provide workshops for persons who have to deal with teen-age drug use, including school officials, police officers, concerned parents and other professionals, said Ms. Alexander.

Straight wants to raise \$200,000 in Hillsborough County, where Tampa attorney Joe Garcia heads fund-raising efforts. Attorney Guy Pereninch of Tarpon Springs is heading efforts to raise another \$200,000 in Pinellas and Pasco counties. The remaining \$400,000 for the training and development center will be raised nationally, Ms. Alexander said.