

*Rehabilitation
Straight
Pasco
Agency Inc.*

State attorney is investigating Straight Inc.

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

By **WILLIAM NOTTINGHAM**
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Pinellas-Pasco State Atty. James T. Russell is investigating potential criminal misconduct involving the Straight Inc. juvenile drug treatment program.

And watching the investigation with interest is the staff of Gov. Reubin Askew. "I will acknowledge to you that we are investigating," Russell said Monday.

But the prosecutor declined to reveal

the nature of the alleged misconduct, or to identify the persons under investigation.

He indicated that the inquiry is aimed at specific occurrences involving Straight — not the program as a whole.

"**THE OPERATION** of the program, really, in all probability, would not fall within the ambit of my jurisdiction," Russell said. "My office can only investigate the possibility of a crime having been committed."

Russell's investigation could be the most serious development yet in the north St. Petersburg drug program's 18-month history. The program's effectiveness has often been praised by parents and Pinellas juvenile court judges.

Since late last year, Straight has been under investigation by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

That investigation was sparked by a series of *St. Petersburg Times* articles that reported accusations of mistreatment leveled by some former clients and program directors.

A later article quoted former program counselors, who charged that Straight occasionally used coercive tactics to control clients.

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In one instance, sources said, a program official reportedly used a gun to threaten a youth thought to be harboring a runaway client.

HRS ultimately determined that Straight may have illegally held some clients against their will. The agency downgraded Straight's operating license to cover a 90-day interim period while the investigation continues.

RECENTLY, OTHER state officials have found that Straight inadequately maintained records relating to a \$50,000 federal grant. They also began checking potential violations of federal conflict-of-interest guidelines involving the grant's use.

James E. Hartz, Straight's executive director, declined to comment Monday about Russell's investigation. *The Times* could not contact Straight's president or its attorney for comment.

But on other occasions, Straight officials have steadfastly denied any wrongdoing.

Russell said his investigation, in part, was triggered by the HRS inquiry. "During the HRS investigation, they kept in touch with me almost on a daily basis and kept us advised," he said. "I can't say that that didn't pique my interest a little bit. I really can't say."

THE PROSECUTOR also said that last week, Bruce Starling, Gov. Askew's general counsel, telephoned from Tallahassee to ask if Straight was under investigation.

Chris English, a governmental assistant to the governor, said her office is "keeping up" with all of the Straight investigations. Askew's office became interested, Ms. English said, because of recent publicity about Straight, and because a parent of one program client wrote the governor seeking a state investigation.

Russell declined to say when he began his investigation. But he said, "I don't believe that it should take us that long" to complete.