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3 more lawsuits challenge Straight's tactics

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While Straight Inc. is on trial this week in Virginia fighting accusations that it mistreated a client, three new lawsuits have raised similar allegations of abuse about the St. Petersburg-based drug treatment program.

All three suits have been filed within the past two weeks — one in Pinellas County Circuit Court; another in Seminole County, near Orlando; a third in Fairfax County in Virginia. And, all three of them, just like the case Fred Collins has taken before a jury in Alexandria, call into question the staff, clients and highly praised methods of Straight.

One suit even says that Straight's tactics drove a young man to a mental hospital.

"It's the confrontation therapy. . . . It's the berating, the degrading situation, the deprivation of food," said an attorney representing that man, 19-year-old Michael ██████ of Lakeland. His mother filed suit against Straight on Thursday in Pinellas County.

JULIAN M. PIPER, the ██████ attorney, said that Straight did not make sure that all the people conducting this therapy were properly trained or qualified, and that the emotional, jarring tactics were used on Michael ██████ when it should have been obvious they were wrong for someone like him. The experience, Piper said, changed ██████ personality "to the point where he can't function in society."

Straight executive director William D. Oliver said on Friday and on Monday that he had not seen two of the suits — ██████ and the one filed in Virginia — and could not comment specifically on their allegations. Monday evening, after the third was filed in Seminole County, he could not be reached for comment.

But speaking generally about the other two, he said, as he has in the past, that abuses of the kind alleged in the suits are against Straight's policies.

OLIVER ALSO questioned the timing of filing a suit just as the highly publicized trial in Virginia begins.

"It's obvious that it's a coordinated effort to discredit us," he said.

Oliver said that Straight is considered the most successful drug rehabilitation program in the country. Indeed, the program has garnered national acclaim from such supporters as Nancy Reagan and Dr. Robert DuPont, former director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"Lawsuits are a problem," Oliver said. "But they're not the real problem. The real problem is kids on drugs."

Michael ██████ was one such kid. When he was 17 and abusing marijuana and alcohol, his mother pointed him to Straight after she saw the program's literature, said their attorney Piper.

But once his mother introduced him to Straight in November 1981, the staff forced him to stay in the program for six months and cut him off from his family — even though he said he wanted to leave and even though he reached his legal majority of age 18 during that time, Piper said.

THE FAMILY'S suit says that ██████ was humiliated, deprived of food and sleep, held in solitary confinement and supervised by "untrained, uneducated and incompetent counselors."

After his release, ██████ mental condition was so poor that a circuit judge in Polk County committed him to psychiatric care, Piper said. For about the past year, the young man has been kept at a private hospital in Miami, Piper said. Ms. ██████ filed the suit on behalf of her son, who the complaint described as "incompetent."

Hope ██████ lawsuit was filed Monday in Seminole County, her attorney said. The 19-year-old woman from Longwood, Fla. she says in her complaint that she was kept against her will at Straight's St. Petersburg office for several hours when she went to visit

her brother, a client, on Jan. 10. She says further that Straight abducted her from a gas station with her parents' help and held against her will for two days in mid-February.

HER SUIT, which seeks \$210,000 in damages, also alleges that, while she was in the program she was intimidated, strip-searched and denied aspirin because it is a "drug."

Miller Newton, national clinical director for Straight, said Monday night that all people who enter Straight are strip-searched. He said that is explained to them during intake procedures, and that the search is necessary to prevent drugs from being smuggled into the program.

He also said Ms. ██████ would not be denied aspirin if she needed it.

At one point, Ms. ██████ questioned Straight's legal right to keep her against her will. Newton responded angrily to her question, she says in a sworn statement she gave last month.

"And he . . . said he didn't give a damn about my legal rights or something to that effect, that I had to stay there. . . ." Ms. ██████ says in her statement.

Newton, in Alexandria for this week's trial, said: "I don't get angry with clients. I do raise my voice, using that to control 'acting out' episodes by clients who threaten harm to themselves or others."

MS. ██████ was allowed to leave after her uncle called the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services and reported that she was being held against her will, according to the statement.

In a third civil lawsuit filed last week against Straight Inc., 22-year-old James ██████ of Maryland claims he was kidnapped by his parents and two "agents" from Straight who tried to drive him to St. Petersburg.

█████ claims he was bound with clotheslines and gagged, but that he managed to escape near Petersburg, Va. His suit asks for \$500,000 in damages.