



Straight Inc. officer Mel Sembler discusses Sarmanian's report. At right is officer Guy Perench.

St. Petersburg Times — RICARDO FERRO

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## Report says Straight<sup>Due</sup> fulfills its purpose, urges more training

■ *Straight Inc. is a private, nonprofit drug treatment program that uses peer pressure and behavioral modification techniques on juveniles from 12 to 18.* ■

St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

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With the chants and songs of their youthful wards resounding in the background, the leaders of Straight Inc. released a study Monday that says the drug treatment program has "more than fulfilled" its purpose.

Though Straight has suffered the growing pains of a new program, analyst Jack Sarmanian said, it is imaginative and well-structured. He praised the use of former clients as staff members and the use of "foster homes" offered by parents of youths who have completed the program.

However, Sarmanian's report also recommended "far more" training for Straight's para-professional and volunteer staff and "special attention" to recruiting minorities into the program. James Hartz, Straight's executive director, said the program has three black youths and two other minority children among the 200 juveniles being treated.

The study was paid for and approved by the U.S. Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). Sarmanian, executive director of Adolescent Counseling in Development, Inc. in Massachusetts, was picked from a list of eight independent analysts in the drug treatment field.

See **STRAIGHT**, 6-B

# Straight

from 1-B

Sarmanian released his findings and answered reporters' questions at a press conference at the program's north-west St. Petersburg headquarters.

LEAA required the evaluation as part of a \$50,000 grant used to establish the program. Payment of the final \$5,000 of that grant has been suspended by federal administrators who are investigating charges of physical abuse in the program, lack of minority youth in the program and conflicts of interest by some of the program's directors.

Sarmanian studied the program for four days, spending as much as 15 hours at a time watching group sessions, interviewing youths, staff and parents. He approved of the structured initial programs where youths spend 12 hours at a Straight warehouse and the rest of their time at a "foster home."

**THE FOSTER PARENTS** have had their own children treated in the program at one time. Sarmanian also approved of the program's requirement that parents attend weekly mass rap sessions and smaller parent counseling sessions.

Sarmanian also praised the use of youths who have already completed the five-phase program as para-professionals and volunteers. "The kids relate a lot easier to people their own age who can show them an example that they can make it," Sarmanian said.

Although the program is open to the entire community, Sarmanian said, it may not touch some groups, particularly minorities. The analyst suggested a "more formalized" relationship with the courts and police and a "concerted effort" to reach community leaders.

**MONDAY'S PRESS** conference was an indication of the program's use of Sarmanian's suggestions. A group of directors, Sarmanian and Hartz answered questions for reporters and posed for television cameras and photographers. A boy and girl who went only by first names told the gathering of their experiences and answered questions.

Hartz said later that a teacher at the University of South Florida is already training Straight's large volunteer and para-professional staff. In addition, the program will soon hire another fulltime professional with training in counseling and social work to review the staff and provide more training.