

# Straight drug program shows improvements

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Straight Inc., the St. Petersburg-based drug treatment program that a year ago was under attack for its controversial treatment methods, has been quietly changing its ways.

"We made every mistake in the book," says William D. Oliver, Straight's executive director. "We were writing the book at the same time, and we learned from those mistakes. But that made us controversial."

Today, state officials say Straight has made strides to answer criticisms raised about the program and the treatment of its clients, and complaints about the program have decreased.

But as recently as last October, Straight was recoiling from a series of setbacks.

After a bitter and highly publicized trial in Alexandria, Va. last May, a federal jury determined that Straight had illegally imprisoned a client, 20-year-old Fred Collins, for more than four months in 1982. Collins was awarded \$220,000 in damages, of which \$40,000 was to compensate him and \$180,000 was meant to punish Straight.

Two months later, Straight closed its branch in Sarasota, one of its five branches nationwide, after a yearlong investigation by state prosecutors into allegations of criminal abuse of clients.

No charges were ever filed against Straight, but the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS), the state agency responsible for monitoring drug treatment programs in Florida, ordered the program to change its ways or close its doors. Straight prepared a list of changes but

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opted to shut down the Sarasota branch because of declining client enrollment.

After vigorously defending the program at the Collins trial, Straight's insurance company — St. Paul Insurance — decided the program had become too high a risk. Straight's policy was canceled, and a new, \$40,000-a-year policy drawn by a Canadian insurer raised Straight's liability premiums by 50 percent.

But now, a year after the Collins trial and six months after Straight's insurance policy was canceled, HRS officials say that Straight appears to have changed its ways and that the surge of controversy that once surrounded the program appears to have subsided.

"THE COLLINS case required that we look at some issues that we had never looked at before, — the due process issues for minors and adults . . . , being able to treat (drug abuse) and . . . at the same time protect the constitutional rights of the clients," says Oliver, 46, who came to Straight shortly after Collins filed his suit in late 1982.

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"We never had faced that issue until the Collins suit raised it."

Straight had been controversial almost since the day it opened its doors in Pinellas County eight years ago. The program uses peer pressure and group confrontation, often lasting 12 hours a day, to wean young abusers from drugs.

Critics, likening the treatment to brainwashing, charged that Straight coerced its clients into enrolling for treatment even if they didn't need it. Afterward, the critics said, the clients were kept at Straight against their will.

That was what Collins, who was the first former client to sue Straight, claimed happened to him. The jury believed his story, and although Straight is appealing the verdict, Oliver says the program has also taken steps to avoid similar allegations in the future.

Oliver says that the program has streamlined its procedure for allowing clients to withdraw from treatment. Those over the age of 18 can leave at will. Those under 18 can leave as soon as their parents arrive to take them. Otherwise, they are handed over to HRS.

The group confrontation therapy sessions, which in the past had led to allegations of physical and mental abuse of clients, are still conducted by former clients who have graduated from the program and stayed on as staff members. But the sessions are now supervised by adult members on the senior staff, Oliver says.

Straight, Oliver says, also has plans to add a part-time psychologist and a part-time nurse to provide medical services for the program. A psychiatrist, Dr. Ali Keskiner, is on call and comes to Straight five hours a week to

examine clients with emotional problems.

"Our procedure now, we're confident, ensures the due process, civil rights of the clients and, at the same time, is reasonably consistent with helping the most people," Oliver says.

HRS officials in charge of monitoring drug treatment programs say they are impressed by the new direction Straight has taken.

"FROM THE THINGS he (Oliver) is saying, he's moving in positive directions, making changes that need to be made," says Harry Moffett, who is in charge of supervising drug treatment programs for HRS.

Complaints of abuse and of clients' being held against their will at Straight, once common at the HRS district office in Largo, have dwindled, says Marcie Biddleman, who used to investigate abuse complaints at Straight and now monitors all drug treatment programs in Pinellas and Pasco counties.

"The program has really been adamant that, if someone doesn't want to be there, they're going to leave," says Ms. Biddleman.

Ms. Biddleman attributes many of the changes at Straight to Randy Ratliff, 38, the recently hired director of the program's St. Petersburg headquarters. Ratliff, blond, clean cut and low key, had been in charge of licensing drug and alcohol abuse programs for the Iowa Department of Substance Abuse until he joined the Straight staff last October. He became director of the St. Petersburg headquarters after Miller Newton, former national clinical director for all of Straight's branches, resigned last November.

Newton was at the center of much of the controversy involving Straight. He left because of changes being made at Straight that Oliver is reluctant to discuss.

"MILLER TOLD me that the reason he was leaving was that we were making some changes at Straight that he couldn't agree with," says Oliver. "He did not get specific with me. . . . As you can see, we have made some changes."

Newton, who now heads Kids of Bergen County Inc. in Hackensack, N.J., could not be reached for comment.

Ratliff has helped ease the once strained relationship between HRS and Straight, Ms. Biddleman says, adding that she used to spend much of her time at the program investigating complaints of abuse. Now, she says, most of her work involves providing assistance.

"It's turned completely around," she says. "If they have a problem, they kind of use me as a liaison."

"To my knowledge, these things (abuse and involuntary confinement) do not occur at this time," Ms. Biddleman says. "I'll be honest with you. I think the program is really making an effort. There has not been a single incident in the last six months that the program did not respond to immediately and with more than the normal response."

Says Ratliff: "HRS is very conscious of what the legal requirements are, as I am. . . . That's why I'm interested in working closely with them, because I want to work . . . in the context of what the law is."

Despite the new emphasis on clients' legal rights at Straight, the program's problems are far from over. There are seven lawsuits pending against the program, all filed by former clients who contend they were abused and held against their will.

Three of the suits were filed by former clients at Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters. Two were filed by former clients in Sarasota. A sixth suit filed against Straight's branch in Virginia a year ago is still pending. And a seventh was filed last September against Straight's branch in Atlanta.

Oliver says the program's lawyers have not yet decided whether to contest the suits or to seek to settle them out of court. Two lawsuits filed by former clients who claimed they were kidnapped by Straight and held against their will in St. Petersburg two years ago were settled out of court last summer. The amounts of the settlements have never been disclosed.

The Collins case alone cost Straight more than \$220,000 in legal fees. It may cost the program another \$220,000 if its appeal fails. A decision is expected this summer.

Meanwhile, Straight's plans to raise \$1.2-million and open 26 branches nationwide by the end of 1986 have been put on hold. And the cost of Straight's expanded medical services and the new procedures added to assure that clients are not mistreated are expected to raise the program's fees. Straight now charges a flat fee of \$2,000 for local clients and \$3,000 for out of state clients. Increases in both fees are expected to be \$1,000, says Oliver.

He contends that client enrollment has not grown because of the Collins controversy, particularly in St. Petersburg. The current enrollment — about 800 at Straight's four branches — is roughly the number Straight had when Collins filed his suit in late 1982.

Looking back at the controversy surrounding Straight, Oliver says, "I think it has hurt."

But he also said that he expects enrollment to come back up just as surely as insurance premiums will go back down.

"I think the Collins case is like a lot of unpleasant experiences that you go through. If you deal with it in the proper way . . . you come out stronger for it. In terms of insurance risk, I think we're a far better insurance risk than we were three years ago."