

Officials held back information on Straight, Inc. report says

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

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State officials have information "corroborating" many allegations of client mistreatment involving Straight Inc., according to a confidential report obtained by *The St. Petersburg Times*.

The information apparently was held back from public release early this year, according to the report, after William J. "Pete" Page Jr., Secretary of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS), received a telephone call of complaint from "one or more" Straight board members.

"Secretary Page's office confirms that contact was made," says the document.

"For whatever reasons, the extensive initial (HRS) report (containing the corroboration) was withdrawn and a considerably briefer report, mostly administrative in nature, was released."

Melvin F. Sembler, Straight's board president, also confirmed that program officials contacted Page.

"YES, I THINK THERE was some conversation," he said. "I don't think it was anything out of the ordinary. We have always been concerned with HRS's ignoring us for the first year and a half and then only getting interested in us after articles in *The St. Petersburg Times*."

Sembler said he did not recall which Straight officials spoke to Page.

Former HRS local director Robert G. Marshall recently told *The Times* that he received a phone call from Page Jan. 18 — the day before the Straight findings were to be released. After talking with Page and a local HRS attorney, Marshall said it was decided that a two-page statement would be made public announcing only that Straight would receive an interim license while it made several program changes.

Marshall was fired by Page in March. Though Straight officials had publicly criticized Marshall's handling of the investigation, Page said the firing stemmed from other matters.

The mistreatment and mismanagement allegations against Straight have been leveled since late last year by several clients, counselors and ex-directors.

One youth claimed to have been "beaten" during an intensive treatment session conducted by more than four program counselors.

TWO EX-COUNSELORS SAY they once looked on as a program official repeatedly slapped a youth. A former program parent says she once saw the same official kick a youth who was passively resisting Straight officials.

HRS has never commented in detail about the allegations, but has forwarded its findings to Pinellas-Pasco State Atty. James T. Russell.

Russell is soon expected to announce if he has evidence of criminal misconduct involving Straight that would be substantial enough to warrant prosecution.

Secretary Page was out of state and unavailable for com-

Jack Gardner, HRS information director, confirmed that at least one Straight official had telephoned Page about the department's investigation.

"But that's not unusual," Gardner said. "As far as I know, when the complaint came in the report wasn't even complete yet."

"If he (Page) was to ever change a report it would be the first time I ever heard about it. He's a real stickler for detail."

Gardner said the HRS report has not been released because it contains the names of several Straight clients.

The confidential document obtained by *The Times* — which mentions the HRS report — is a "Special On-Site Monitoring Report" on Straight. It was prepared last March by the Bureau of Criminal Justice Planning and Assistance. That agency has been investigating Straight's use of a \$50,000 federal grant from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. For the time being, Straight's grant payments have been suspended.

The agency report confirms that four Straight board members — including board president Sembler — violated federal conflict-of-interest regulations in connection with the grant. Those violations could prompt federal officials to demand that all or part of the grant money be returned by Straight, officials say.

"THE CONFLICT-OF-INTEREST issue arose when it became evident that children of three current or former board members — Richard G. Batchelor, Helen R. Petermann and Marlene Hauser — had been employed by Project Straight and paid out of grant funds," says the report. Though Mrs. Petermann is no longer a director, "she is a fulltime salaried employee" second-in-command to Executive Director James E. Hartz.

Sembler's conflict involves his directorship in the First Bank of Treasure Island, where Straight keeps its bank accounts.

Straight's "accounts should not be in a bank in which a board member has a direct interest," the report says. "These accounts should be moved to a 'neutral' facility at the earliest possible time."

Sembler said he was not aware of any criticism stemming from the placement of Straight's bank accounts.

When informed that HRS apparently had corroborated some of the mistreatment claims, Sembler said "I don't believe that, I don't think that's factual."

But in its own recent evaluation of Mrs. Petermann, the Straight board found that she admitted slapping one client and that she wrapped two others in blankets.

Many parents and clients have praised Straight as being an effective rehabilitation program. Pinellas judges occasionally have ordered juveniles into the program as an alternative to sending them to jail.

The report confirms that Straight — which during its first 18 months of operation had enrolled only one black client — is not racially balanced compared to the "community at large."

"THERE IS NO APPARENT indication of deliberate, overt racial and ethnic discrimination," it continues. "However, there has been no apparent attempt by Project Straight to make their services available to all racial and ethnic groups within the community, which is a violation of LEAA regulations."

One of the report's ten "recommendations" is that Straight seek minority clients more aggressively.

Straight asks parents to donate from \$450 to \$550 for each child they enroll, but program officials have insisted that the payment is not required.

One part of the report refers to Straight's "client fees (disguised as 'donations')," and says program official Hartz "could only remember one instance in which the fees had been waived." Since it opened in September of 1976, about 460 juveniles have been enrolled in the program.

HRS should examine the treatment techniques used, the report says, "since HRS is responsible for ensuring that programs operated under its auspices (licensed by) are not detrimental to the welfare of clients."

Straight officials have been sent copies of the monitoring report, officials say, and will have an opportunity to respond to the findings.