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State tells Straight *TWC* to change its ways

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Straight Inc. has been renewed state licenses to operate its branches in St. Petersburg and Sarasota by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

But the national treatment program for drug abusers, based in St. Petersburg, has been required to change some of its practices to insure that its clients' rights are protected and to prevent abuses said to have occurred at the program in the past.

"I feel comfortable with where we are with the relationship we have with HRS," said Straight executive director William D. Oliver, referring to a 12-point agreement between Straight and HRS completed earlier this month.

"You're going to see Straight become the noncontroversial program that it should be," Oliver added.

HRS IS the state agency respon-

sible for monitoring drug abuse programs like Straight and issuing them annual licenses to operate. Straight's St. Petersburg license was reissued two weeks ago; its Sarasota license was reissued for an interim 90-day period last week and is expected to be renewed for the remainder of the year.

Straight, which operates programs in three other cities outside Florida, is regarded by some drug abuse experts as the most successful treatment program in the nation. But over the past year the program's controversial methods have been the focus of two investigations by state prosecutors in Florida and a damaging, highly publicized civil trial in Virginia.

Less than a month ago a federal jury in Alexandria awarded \$220,000 in damages to former client Fred Collins after deciding that he was illegally imprisoned by Straight's St. Petersburg and Virginia branches for more than four months last year. Of that

amount, \$40,000 was awarded to compensate Collins and \$180,000 was awarded to punish Straight.

State prosecutors in Sarasota and in St. Petersburg, meanwhile, have been investigating charges of criminal abuse made by parents and former clients against both of Straight's Florida branches.

THE CHANGES Straight agreed to make, which will apply to both the Sarasota and St. Petersburg branches, are intended to resolve the program's differences with HRS, prevent future allegations of abuse and help the program clear its blemished reputation, said Straight executive director Oliver.

Already, Straight has spent more than \$200,000 in attorney's fees defending itself against the Collins lawsuit, Oliver said. Publicity from both

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the trial and the state attorneys' investigations have also driven away new clients, forcing new enrollments to drop 40 percent below projections. If that figure remains constant, Oliver said, Straight will face about \$750,000 in losses this year.

According to the agreement, Straight will:

- ✓ Provide a private telephone for clients to use for calling HRS, either to report abuses at Straight or to seek assistance in withdrawing from the program.

- ✓ Inform prospective clients within the first two hours of their initial "intake" interview that Straight is a voluntary program and that clients must be able to leave at any time.

- ✓ Allow clients who are 18 and older to withdraw immediately after discussing their decision to leave with a senior Straight client or staff member. Clients under 18 will follow the same procedure but will only be released to their parents or to HRS.

- ✓ Physically restrain clients only when it is necessary to prevent them from hurting themselves or others. Each incident must be supervised by an adult staff member and detailed in a written report.

Program participants may hold clients on the floor as a method of restraint but are prohibited from sitting on them, a practice that has been documented in numerous complaints against Straight.

- ✓ Insure that "withholding of food and medical care is never used as a form of punishment."

The HRS office in Fort Myers demanded the changes last April after Sarasota State Attorney James A. Gardner turned over more than two dozen sworn statements taken from former clients, parents and staff members at Straight during a year-long investigation.

THE STATEMENTS allege beatings, sleep deprivation, restricted diets, poor medical treatment, periods of isolated confinement and physical and mental abuse at Straight's Sarasota branch.

Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney James T. Russell, meanwhile, has also been investigating charges of abuse at Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters, though he has declined to discuss the case with reporters. Monday, Russell's secretary said simply that his office is maintaining an "active file" on Straight.

No criminal charges have been filed in either case. And in the Sarasota case, Straight officials contend that the abuses alleged in the complaints are "totally against Straight's policies."

Nevertheless, HRS and Straight officials have been meeting on and off for the past two months hammering out the details of the program changes. Monday, Straight executive director Oliver said he hoped the changes would resolve the troubles.

"We're nonprofit, and if the community doesn't support the program, there's no wealth of capital to keep things going," said Oliver. "Anytime you become controversial and get publicity of this type its going to cause people to step back and take another look (at the program)."

But Straight's problems are far from over. Though attorneys for Straight plan to appeal the Collins verdict, three more lawsuits against Straight are still pending.

ONE, FILED in Pinellas County, alleges that a 19-year-old Lakeland man is now confined to a Miami mental hospital because of Straight's treatment methods. It asks for more than \$5,000 in damages, the minimum amount required to bring a case to trial in circuit court.

A second suit, filed in Seminole County, alleges that Straight helped abduct a 19-year-old Longwood woman and held her against her will for two days last February. It asks for more than \$200,000 in damages. A third suit, filed in Fairfax County, Va. charges that a 22-year-old Maryland man was kidnapped by his parents and two "agents" from Straight last April. The man claims he was bound with clothesline and gagged but managed to escape his captors on the way to St. Petersburg.

That suit, which asks for \$500,000 in damages, is being argued by Philip Hirschkop, the same attorney who successfully represented Collins against Straight last month.

Monday, Hirschkop also filed written arguments in U.S. District Court in Alexandria asking for a federal injunction against Straight. The injunction would prohibit Straight from using coercive tactics to enroll new clients, prevent the program from placing locks and alarms on doors to keep clients from leaving, end all use of physical force and order that Straight clients be allowed to receive mail and make telephone calls.

A ruling on the motion is expected later this summer, according Hirschkop's associate, attorney David Fudala.