

Straight plans to challenge state law on teen drug treatment

By HELEN HUNTLEY
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

SEP 15 1984

Officials of Straight Inc., a St. Petersburg drug-treatment program, said Friday they won't keep teen-agers in the program against their will — but they sure would like to.

Straight Executive Director William D. Oliver said the organization will comply with the state law that gives children the right to accept or refuse treatment. However, he said the organization plans to challenge the law as soon as possible.

Oliver said parents should have the right to force their children into drug treatment — a right they have in some other states — because children often are incapable of making appropriate decisions.

"ONE MINUTE they want to be here and the next minute they don't," he said.

A Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) investigation last month found 13 youths who were enrolled in Straight against their will and 15 more who said they were coerced or tricked into enrolling in the program.

The investigation also turned up evidence that some children had been abused or neglected while in the Straight program and that Straight employees had failed to report to HRS when they learned about child abuse that occurred outside the program.

HRS officials said Straight would lose its license if it didn't start complying with state law and department regulations.

Under a plan Straight officials submitted

to HRS on Friday, Straight clients are to be reminded daily that the program is voluntary and that they have the right to leave.

Straight also revised its procedures for admitting children and for allowing them to leave, in response to the HRS charges. In addition, new procedures were established for reporting child abuse and for arranging for medical treatment for clients.

"It appears that if these new procedures are followed that Straight Inc. can operate in compliance with the law," said Thomas Wester, HRS deputy district administrator. "Hopefully, it's going to mean a significant change in the way in which they're operating the program."

WESTER SAID the local HRS office will

recommend that HRS Secretary David H. Pingree approve Straight's new policies and procedures. If Straight fails to comply with those policies, its license still could be revoked, Wester said.

"The department will monitor Straight at least on a monthly basis to insure compliance," Wester said.

In a letter delivered to HRS on Friday, Oliver also proposed that a three-member committee be appointed to evaluate Straight's St. Petersburg program and report to Straight, HRS and the public.

Straight and HRS each would appoint one person to the committee, and those two persons would choose a third member under Oliver's proposal. Wester said HRS officials are considering the proposal.