

Straight Inc staff says clients held against will

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In sworn statements, staff members at the closed Sarasota branch of Straight Inc. told state prosecutors that the program routinely kept clients against their will. Those who resisted, the staff members said, were sometimes grabbed by the neck, pulled by the hair, poked, thrown against walls and sat upon by groups of other clients.

And those who ran away from the program were occasionally captured and brought back, according to testimony included in more than 600 pages of statements by the staff members, former clients and their parents. The documents were released last week by Sarasota State Attorney James A. Gardner.

Two of the staff members, Michael [redacted] and Anthony [redacted] no longer work for Straight, a private, St. Petersburg-based drug treatment program that is nationally known for its "kids helping kids" approach to adolescent drug abuse.

The third, Chris Cassler, 23, is now an executive staff member at Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters, where all three said that they received training and instruction for their staff duties in Sarasota.

No criminal charges were ever filed against the Sarasota operation, and Straight officials maintain that the practices said to have occurred there are against Straight's policies.

Reached Friday, Straight Executive Director William D. Oliver said he had not seen the sworn statements. When he was read portions of them by a reporter, Oliver said simply, "Those are not our procedures now."

OLIVER DECLINED to comment further because the program currently is defending five separate lawsuits filed by former clients who claim they were abused and illegally imprisoned by Straight.

"The reason I'm not responding is that some of those issues are still in litigation," said Oliver.

Straight's use of peer pressure and intense group confrontation therapy to wean adolescents from drugs has made it one of the most successful and highly regarded drug treatment programs in the nation. Supporters, including parents and former

'I want to leave...'

Statement by Chris Cassler, executive staff member at Straight's former branch in Sarasota, to David Levin, assistant state attorney in Sarasota:

Levin: Okay. What would, what would happen if a kid over 18 (years old) said, "I don't care what you say, I want to leave," and attempted to walk out the door?

Cassler: The group would take it upon themselves to restrain him. In other words, there's a proper way of leaving and an improper way, and that would be an improper way of leaving.

Levin: All right. Now when you say the group would take it upon themselves to restrain him, can you describe that for me please?

Cassler: The persons would physically grab him, and sit him in his chair and hold onto him.

Levin: Now, have you observed that to have occurred?

Cassler: Yeah. Um-hum.

Levin: Have you ever instructed members of the group to restrain someone from leaving?

Cassler: Yes.

Levin: Okay, how many times have you had to do that?

Cassler: That's the same, the same, that's the same question that you've raised before.

Levin: Okay. Over 10?

Cassler: Yes.

Levin: Okay. Is that, is that standard procedure?

Cassler: Yes, just like in any mental health, mental health unit or, or psychiatric ward. We're responsible for every child.

Levin: Okay. Now would that include court ordered (clients) as well as (voluntarily enrolled)?

Cassler: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

Levin: Okay, now we're talking about people over the age of 18 now?

Cassler: Right.

Levin: All right, does that also occur in St. Petersburg?

Cassler: Yes, I believe it does.

Levin: So, that was part of your training? Then to do this?

Cassler: Yes.

clients, credit Straight with changing antisocial drug users into well adjusted and highly motivated members of society.

The program, with out-of-state branches in Georgia, Virginia and Ohio, claims a 60 percent success rate and counts such drug abuse experts as Dr. Robert DuPont, former founding director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, as major supporters.

CRITICS, HOWEVER, contend that Straight's group confrontation therapy accomplishes little more than brainwashing and that the program abuses the rights of its clients. Last May, a former

client who said he was imprisoned for more than four months last year at the program's St. Petersburg headquarters and at its Virginia branch won \$220,000 in damages after a heated and highly publicized federal court trial.

Of that amount, \$40,000 was awarded to compensate the former client and \$180,000 was awarded to punish Straight. The verdict is being appealed.

Last winter, State Attorney Gardner subpoenaed three senior staff members from Straight as part of a yearlong investigation into charges of possible criminal

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Straight

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child abuse at the Sarasota branch.

Senior staff members [redacted] and executive staff member Cassler were all granted immunity in exchange for their statements.

The staff members' statements show that in the Sarasota program:

✓ Staff members regularly ignored requests by clients wanting to leave the program and ordered clients restrained if they tried to walk out the door, according to Cassler.

Even though state law requires all drug treatment programs to be voluntary, Cassler said that the policy of restraining clients who tried to leave Straight was taught during the staff members' training. He said staff training took place in St. Petersburg.

Straight maintains that clients can leave the program if they follow proper procedures. Clients who tried to follow the procedure, which at one time could last as long as two weeks, almost always changed their minds, Cassler and Edmondson said in their statements.

✓ Prospective clients were threatened with "court orders" committing them into the Straight program unless they enrolled voluntarily, according to [redacted]. [redacted] said the practice occurred "maybe 10 percent of the time."

✓ Clients were enrolled in Straight who were not drug dependent by Straight's own standards, according to [redacted] and [redacted].

✓ Staff members ordered clients confined in isolated "time out" rooms for resisting Straight's treatment methods, according to [redacted], and for repeatedly asking to leave the program, according to Cassler.

✓ Clients who refused to participate in Straight's group therapy sessions or who were disruptive were made to lie on the floor face up and then sat upon by groups of up to six other clients, according to Cassler and [redacted].

STRAIGHT HAS maintained that this practice was used only when clients became violent and needed to be restrained. But Cassler said that it was "standard procedure" for clients to be sat upon for being "disruptive," or for "taking the attention off the group" therapy.

Occasionally, Cassler said, more than six clients might be needed to sit on another client, "if it's a rough customer."

✓ Clients who resisted Straight staff members or showed "defiance" toward the program were sometimes grabbed by the neck, pulled by the hair, thrown or pushed against walls, according to Cassler.

"I've had to push them against the wall before... because they were getting physically violent with me or... they were resisting me," Cassler said.

Clients who refused to pay attention or partake in group therapy were forced to give up their chairs and sit cross-legged on the floor for 12-hour periods, [redacted] hanning and Cassler.

✓ Runaway clients were allowed to be brought back forcibly by parents and members of the "7th Step Society," a group of former Straight clients still receiving after-care counseling, Cassler, [redacted] said. Staff members provided parents with phone numbers of 7th Step Society members whom they could call to help capture escaped clients,

according to [redacted].

"They (the runaway clients) might have to be carried in or be... grabbed by the belt loop or the shoulder or something like that..." Cassler said. "I don't recall anybody that was tied. They might have been handcuffed."

[redacted] no longer work for Straight but did at the time they were questioned by prosecutors. Cassler, who was the senior staff supervisor in Sarasota when most of the activities took place, was promoted last December. He is now a program coordinator for Straight in St. Petersburg.

Straight's clinical director Miller Newton, in charge of therapy for all of the program's branches, was in Texas last week and could not be reached for comment. In the past, though, Newton has blamed Straight's troubles in Sarasota on former director Hugh Burns, whom he fired shortly before promoting Cassler last December.

UNDER BURNS, Newton said in a statement to the *Times* last April, the Sarasota branch was not following guidelines from the St. Petersburg headquarters. Instead, it was taking "its own independent course."

Burns, in his sworn statement to prosecutors, counters that he was fired because: "I didn't follow to the letter the way things were done in St. Pete."

"I think I was much more lenient and probably more caring and gentle in terms of dealing with the parents... and in the way I would handle clients."

"I was much too gentle a man, I guess, for the kinds of things they wanted."

In his statement, Burns claims that he angered Newton because he hired a staff member and a cook without getting formal approval from Newton. All of the program's policies, Burns said, were established in St. Petersburg, where the staff members were trained.

Assistant State Attorney David Levin, who handled the investigation into Straight, said Burns was an administrator for the branch and that his duties mostly involved financial affairs and community relations. Treatment policy, Levin said, was controlled from the St. Petersburg headquarters.

"**THE SARASOTA** branch was acting in accordance of approved methods being taught in St. Petersburg," Levin said. "Each staff member indicated that they were acting no differently than what they were taught to do in St. Petersburg... Basically, the bottom line is that we have every reason to believe that they were following policies and treatments dictated by St. Petersburg."

Straight suspended its operations in Sarasota last July, several months after Gardner opted not to file criminal charges. Instead, he turned over the results of his investigation to the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, the state agency responsible for licensing drug abuse programs.

The state agency ordered Straight last April to write new procedures designed to protect its clients' rights or risk losing its license to operate in Florida. Straight complied, and, in June, its licenses for both the Sarasota and St. Petersburg operations were reissued.

But in July, the program opted to close its doors in Sarasota, citing continuing criticism from Gardner and a negative public backlash as reasons for a declining client enrollment. The 47 clients still in the branch were transferred to St. Petersburg.