

## Drug program closes its doors

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### Document Text

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Straight Inc., the controversial adolescent drug treatment program that once was praised by the White House as among the best in the nation, closed its center here over the weekend because of dwindling enrollment.

The national headquarters for the drug program will remain at 3001 Gandy Blvd. But the Tampa Bay treatment center, with a capacity for about 100 clients, was closed after enrollment dropped to 19, said Bernadine Braithwaite, national executive director.

"It's just the times," she said Sunday, blaming a tough economic climate. She said the one-year program is often too great a financial burden for parents, many of whom favor shorter programs.

The center's 19 clients were transferred to a Straight center in Atlanta on Friday, Braithwaite said. Atlanta and Detroit are the only two remaining centers, she said.

The closing appeared to catch the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services by surprise.

"We have not been notified," said Elaine Fulton-Jones, HRS spokeswoman, "and they are required to give us notice. This comes as a complete surprise."

Fulton-Jones said she called several HRS officials Sunday and none of them had heard about the closing. A routine site visit had even been scheduled for May 10, she said.

Mel Sembler, local developer, former ambassador to Australia and a board member for Straight, said there were about a dozen employees at the center here. He said they were given the option to relocate.

Braithwaite said the center may reopen later. "We're looking at some different options," she said.

The closing of the area flagship operation ends a stormy 17-year era for the program.

In its heyday, the Straight philosophy of using other adolescents and reformed drug users to confront current users spread across the nation. At various times there were programs in California, Virginia, Texas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Georgia, Maryland and Florida.

But almost from the beginning the unorthodox approach was the target of complaints, investigations and lawsuits. Some parents praised it, calling it a lifesaver for their children. Others went to authorities to charge that their children had been humiliated, struck or held against their will.

As the program evolved, Straight officials maintained that their methods also evolved and that policies were changed. For example, by 1991 only trained counselors were allowed to restrain clients who became disruptive, and new clients were no longer led around by their belt loops.

Straight officials have long said that their methods were not abusive and that complaints came from disgruntled former clients.

Richard Bradbury of Tampa, who said he was a Straight client from 1983 until 1984, called the closing "a great day."

Bradbury said he is suing the organization for defaming and attempting to discredit him. Bradbury said he has worked with former clients and their families for seven years to counteract what he calls the abuses of the program.

Despite its detractors, Nancy Reagan and President Bush have called Straight one of the nation's best drug treatment programs for adolescents. - Times staff writer Roger Clendening II contributed to this report.

**[Illustration]**

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; Caption: Mel Sembler

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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