

Straight sues client families

[CITY Edition]

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Document Text

In April 1987, Richard and Susan █████ checked their 16-year-old son into Straight Inc. in St. Petersburg for drug treatment.

Months later █████ ran away from both the program and the "host family" where Straight clients live during the early phase of treatment.

He told his parents he left because he had been seduced by his host mother, Mrs. Ferris said in an interview.

"I hate that organization like you can't believe," she said. Her anger only increased when Straight sued her and her husband in October 1990, claiming they still owed \$1,089 for their son's drug treatment.

"How can we pay you for services not rendered?," Mrs. █████ says she told Straight officials. "Look how you've screwed up his mind."

The █████ are not alone in their legal problems with Straight. In the last 10 months, Straight has sued at least 80 families in Pinellas courts for failing to fully pay for their childrens' drug treatment, court records show.

Straight officials say the wave of suits are sound business practice. If successful, Straight stands to collect hundreds of thousands of dollars in overdue payments.

"We have a lot of people we have carried for a long time, and they owe us an awful lot of money," said Straight spokeswoman Joy Margolis.

But in interviews and court documents, many of those families are firing back, accusing Straight of deceptive, high-pressure sales tactics and abusive treatment.

Patricia Neumann of Lake Alfred in Polk County said in court documents that Straight officials "committed fraud" by coercing her to sign a blank contract committing her son to treatment. The coercion, she alleged, included "several hours of mental intimidation" and being told that her son "would die without treatment."

Robert and Veronica McCallion of St. Petersburg said in court papers that Straight officials were "unprincipled" and "had no intention of living up to their promise of treatment and rehabilitation" for their daughter.

Darlene Licate of Spring Hill in Hernando County said her daughter was strip-searched and verbally abused by Straight officials.

"I don't pay for verbal abuse," Mrs. Licate said. "I don't pay for any kind of abuse."

Straight spokeswoman Margolis said the criticism is unfounded. "Sounds to me like they didn't pay their bills and are looking for excuses," she said.

"Dysfunctional people look for other places to put the blame," she added. "We don't stand on the street corners with guns forcing people to go in."

Florida regulators of drug treatment programs give Straight high marks. Straight also has drawn praise from Nancy Reagan and President Bush.

But in several other states, Straight programs recently have come under severe criticism. Straight pulled out of Virginia this week after state officials refused to renew its license, citing a long history of violations. Straight closed its California

branch last year when regulators there refused it a license because of concerns about abusive treatment methods.

Similar concerns prompted Massachusetts last month to pull Straight's foster care license.

Straight lawyers have fared better in Pinellas civil court, getting settlements and judgments against dozens of families.

In November, for example, the █████ settled with Straight, "just to get rid of them," Mrs. Ferris said.

"The organization is like a bad penny: You think you're done with them, but they keep popping up," she said.

[Illustration]

COLOR PHOTO; Straight Inc.: 91; Caption: Susan Ferris

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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