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Drug program got good review

[CITY Edition]

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Document Text

Straight Inc., the troubled St. Petersburg-based drug treatment program, got generally good grades in a recent inspection by state health workers.

But a spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) says the report card is incomplete.

The agency is looking into a series of recent complaints that Straight clients were abused by staff and other clients.

Licensing officials "did not find any major areas of concern" during a tour of the Straight treatment center in St. Petersburg earlier this week, said Elaine Fulton-Jones, an HRS spokeswoman in St. Petersburg.

But HRS child protection workers are investigating a handful of complaints they received in the last week from Straight clients. Fulton-Jones said confidentiality rules prohibit her from discussing the complaints.

"Depending on the outcome (of the investigations), we will take another look to see if there are any problems that need to be fixed," she said. "We certainly take any allegation seriously, and they will be investigated by the child protective investigative team."

Copies of complaints also were sent to the St. Petersburg Times.

The letters detail the experiences of three teen-agers who say they "escaped" from the treatment center Dec. 6. Two of the youths were forcibly returned to the center, the complaints state.

In one report, a client said he was physically abused at the Straight treatment center and at the home of a Straight host. In the first of five phases of treatment, Straight clients are taken to live with the family of a more advanced Straight client.

"Once in the home, I was physically pushed into a bedroom and pushed around some more," the client wrote. "Then I was picked up in the air and body-slammed on the floor."

The other clients complain that they were restrained physically by Straight staff because they failed to sit up straight in their chairs.

The allegations come after reports that HRS administrators also are investigating Straight's Orlando treatment center.

The Orlando center, which is operating under a temporary license, is being scrutinized for allegations of mistreatment and has been plagued by such allegations for several years.

Founded 13 years ago in St. Petersburg, Straight operates six treatment centers nationally that use confrontational rap sessions and peer-pressure therapy to try to free adolescents from drug dependency. A seventh treatment center in Dallas was closed this fall.

Joy Margolis, a Straight spokeswoman in St. Petersburg, acknowledges the program has suffered from "negative publicity." But the treatment center's staff has worked with state health administrators to improve the program, she said.

"This is not the same program today that is was several years ago," Margolis said. "It's just not the same. It's 100 percent in compliance with state regulations."

The three clients who complained about the program could not have "escaped" from the treatment center, Margolis said, because the facility remains unlocked at all hours. In addition, clients are free to use the phone to call police or social

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workers.

"We do not abuse kids," Margolis said. "We have an open-door policy, and our door is unlocked." Information from the Associated Press was used in this report.

[Illustration]

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; Caption: Joy Margolis

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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