

Drug program to alter policies cited by HRS

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Author: JOSHUA L. WEINSTEIN

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ST. PETERSBURG - A drug and alcohol treatment program has called state concerns about some of its practices "irrelevant and naive," but has nonetheless taken action to change or clarify those practices.

The state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) in June denied Straight Inc. a full license renewal because of concerns about restraining methods, client privacy and records maintenance. Instead of granting a one-year license renewal, HRS granted an 90-day interim license.

Straight is appealing the HRS decision, said Page Peary, the program's vice president for operations. Until the appeal procedure is over though, Straight intends to comply with HRS investigators' recommendations.

"We want to get back into the business of helping kids now," Peary said Thursday. "We don't want any kind of cloak of an interim license."

In a July 17 letter to HRS, Straight asked the state to re-inspect its program Aug. 1. HRS had planned a re-inspection Aug. 22.

Treatment in the 13-year-old Straight program can last a year or more and relies heavily on peer pressure.

Despite a \$220,000 lawsuit by a young man who claimed Straight held him against his will for several months and criticism that the program uses brainwashing techniques, Straight has expanded to eight cities in addition to St. Petersburg and has been certified by the Joint Commission of Accredited Hospital Organizations.

Among the concerns raised by HRS were that Straight used clients to restrain other clients, that it did not provide clients privacy in the bathroom and that it did not permit clients free access to telephones if they wanted to call HRS.

Straight now has written policies specifying that clients are to be granted access to telephones should they wish to call HRS, that they should have privacy in the bathroom and that they are not to be restrained by other clients except in special circumstances.

But Peary took strong exception to one of the bathroom concerns:

"It was noted that clients complained of constipation and general aches and pains in Phase I (of the program) but were okay when moved to Phase II," a May 23 HRS report reads. Clients' constipation, the report reads, "may also relate to the practice of observing clients while they are in the bathroom."

That comment, Peary said, is naive.

"They're concerned about constipation on first phase and we're concerned about saving lives. ... Their concerns about constipation and those processes is really the very example, the metaphor I'm trying to draw, that shows their evaluation is really irrelevant and naive."

Straight was founded by St. Petersburg developers Mel Sembler and Joe Zappala, now ambassadors-designate to Australia and Spain, respectively. Sembler is chairman of the board of Straight.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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