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States take hard look at Straight

[CITY Edition]

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In Massachusetts, authorities say a youth is punched in the face by a staff member of Straight Inc., the controversial drug treatment program based in St. Petersburg. In Virginia, a 13-year-old Straight client is molested by a 19-year-old client, but the incident is never reported to state officials. In California, state officials refuse to license Straight, citing evidence of "unusual punishment, infliction of pain and humiliation." These are troubled times for Straight, which in happier days won praise from Nancy Reagan and President Bush as one of the nation's best drug treatment programs for adolescents. Under intense criticism from state regulators, Straight pulled out of California last year and Virginia this week. In March, Straight's treatment program in Texas was placed on probation by a major accreditation commission. Last month, Massachusetts regulators refused to renew Straight's foster care license, which could make it difficult for Straight to continue business there because the program requires clients to live with "host families" while undergoing treatment. "We had very severe concerns about what was going on there," said Betty McClure of Massachusetts' state Office for Children. She cited the case of a child with scoliosis - curvature of the spine - who was forced to sit on a floor for 10 hours and was physically restrained by other children. Straight officials deny the allegations of mistreatment. "We don't abuse kids," said Joy Margolis, Straight's spokeswoman in St. Petersburg. "If we abused kids do you think parents would want to have their kids here?" Margolis said two-thirds of the children who complete Straight's long-term therapy remain drug-free for at least two years. "We do a lot of good," she said. "We save lives. We reunite families." Straight currently operates treatment programs in five states - Texas, Michigan, Florida, Georgia and Massachusetts. Straight officials claim to have treated more than 50,000 family members since the drug treatment program was established in 1976. Straight offers an intense five-phase program in which clients must adhere to strict rules: No living at home. No TV. No school. Limited contact with anyone outside the program. Gradually, as progress is made, the restrictions are relaxed and teen-agers are returned to families and schools. Over time, Straight has refined and revised many of its more controversial methods, Margolis said. Now only trained counselors are allowed to restrain clients who become violent. "Oldcomers" no longer lead "newcomers" around by their belts. They link arms instead. "It's a bonding technique," Margolis explained. One state where regulators are pleased with Straight's recent performance is Florida. Straight has programs in Orlando and St. Petersburg. In 1989, the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) threatened to yank Straight's license unless it fixed several problems. For example, HRS officials were concerned by accounts that clients were allowed to restrain other clients. Straight corrected the problems, HRS officials say. "They're in good standing with our department here," said Bob Holm, HRS' substance abuse coordinator for Pinellas County. "They've done well." Officials in other states tell different stories. Jacqueline M. Ennis supervises licensing for Virginia's Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services. She said that in July 1990 Straight officials signed a consent agreement promising to correct several problems. But when Virginia officials inspected Straight six months later, they found 76 violations, she said. Some violations were minor, such as paper work errors, she said. Others were potentially life threatening. Several children attempted suicide while staying with host families, but the attempts were not reported and the children were not treated, Ennis said. And Virginia officials learned that a Straight client had molested a younger client from news reports. Ennis also criticized Straight for persisting with "dehumanizing" treatment techniques. Some teen-age clients were forced to reveal their sexual fantasies during group sessions, she said. Others were subjected to what she called "spit therapy," where children would spit on each other to reduce their egos. Straight spokeswoman Margolis said Virginia officials overreacted to "unsubstantiated claims" made by disgruntled clients. She said Straight complied with all Virginia regulations and had been lauded by state officials for making improvement. So Virginia's decision in January not to renew Straight's license was a surprise, Margolis said. Rather than fight Virginia regulators, Straight officials decided this week to move the program about 30 miles north, to Columbia, Md. Ennis said Maryland regulators have been warned. "I think the folks in Maryland know what they're getting," she said. Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

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