

## Audit says Straight Inc. got breaks

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### Document Text

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CORRECTION (7/10/93): A story Thursday should have said an audit found that state officials may have renewed the license of drug treatment center Straight Inc. because of pressure from state senators and former U.S. Ambassador Mel Sembler. The audit said "it cannot be unequivocally corroborated that this outside influence actually altered the decision to issue the license."

An audit has concluded that state officials renewed the license of controversial drug treatment center Straight Inc. because of pressure from state senators and one of the center's founders, former U.S. Ambassador Mel Sembler.

The state audit also says Florida's experience with Straight shows "there has been a propensity for abuse or excessive force to be used."

Straight was formed in St. Petersburg and attained nationwide publicity in the 1980s, but the organization has since pulled out of St. Petersburg and closed several centers around the country.

Straight has long been dogged by allegations that it was physically and mentally abusive to the adolescents who were checked into the program.

The audit, conducted by the inspector general office of HRS, was released Wednesday. It quotes HRS officials who said a senior HRS administrator, Ivor Groves, wanted Straight's license renewed, despite concerns such as "withholding medication, excessive use of force, withholding food, sleep deprivation, etc." Groves denied the allegations.

At the time of this debate, Sembler had been nominated but not confirmed as the U.S. ambassador to Australia. He also had been one of the founders of Straight. Because of that, the audit said, "it appears that some members of HRS experienced some degree of pressure to grant Straight a license."

However, the report concludes that "it cannot be unequivocally corroborated that this outside influence actually altered the decision to issue the license." The audit also said "though it cannot be substantiated, the (auditor's) investigation indicated that (former HRS Secretary Greg) Coler was contacted several times by Mel Sembler concerning Straight issues."

Sembler and Straight officials could not be reached by the Times Wednesday night.

The audit also quotes an HRS official, program supervisor Ray T. Berry, who says several state senators called the agency to support Straight. The senators were not named.

Regarding physical abuses, the audit said in several cases clients were placed in a restraint that prevented them from moving their limbs.

In other cases, Straight officials withheld medication from clients, meaning that "clients were knowingly placed in a dangerous situation by Straight staff and in one case injuries occurred that required emergency room treatment," the report said. The audit began after a complaint by Richard Bradbury, a former Straight client and vocal critic of the organization.

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### Abstract (Document Summary)

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