

Critics say Straight Inc. target of fraud investigation

[CITY Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: CURTIS KRUEGER

Date: May 7, 1993

Start Page: 3.B

Section: TAMPA BAY AND STATE

Text Word Count: 477

Document Text

The controversial drug treatment program Straight Inc., which may be preparing to close its national headquarters here, is being investigated by the FBI for possible insurance fraud, say two critics of the program.

Richard Bradbury, a former Straight client and staff member, and Barbara [REDACTED], the mother of a former client, said they had been questioned by the FBI. Both said the questions were related to insurance fraud.

Bradbury, who has formed a network of former clients and others who oppose Straight, said he was to meet with the FBI today. He said he was asked "to bring the documentation and other information related to insurance fraud."

Bradbury contends the organization bills people for doctor-supervised therapy when doctors actually haven't been present.

Mrs. [REDACTED], whose son was in the program in 1989 and 1990, said she acted as a host mother, allowing other clients to stay in her home. However, she said she was not paid as promised. She estimated the cost of her son's treatment at about \$10,000 and said he has needed additional counseling to get over the humiliating treatment he received.

Larry Curtin, special agent in the FBI's Tampa division, would not confirm or deny an investigation.

At the organization's national headquarters in St. Petersburg, a woman who answered the phone Thursday said the office was closing soon. She declined to give her name. The organization's sign had been taken down and a "for sale" sign was posted.

Wesley Pennington, president of Straight, at first denied that the national office would be closing.

After being told that a staff member had said otherwise, he said, "Well, then, take your lead from them." He declined to comment further.

Last week, Straight closed its St. Petersburg area office, which had the capacity for 100 clients but had only 16.

Straight has won national acclaim, as well as national controversy, because of its methods. Nancy Reagan, former President George Bush, former Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach and psychologist Joyce Brothers have promoted the program, which operates on the theory that drug-dependent youths need to get into a drug-free environment and experience peer pressure to stay off drugs.

But critics say the organization has relied on abusive methods that included the humiliation of clients, and that some of the adolescents in the program were struck by staff.

The program has run into problems with regulatory officials in several states. In Florida, the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services is investigating Straight.

Virginia officials announced in 1991 that they would not renew a Straight center's license because the program allegedly had failed to provide proper education, had allowed clients to be improperly restrained and had made mistakes in evaluating client progress. So the center moved to Maryland, and then closed last year.

Despite the controversy over its methods, Straight officials have consistently blamed the economy for declining enrollment.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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