

HRS: STOP FORCING DRUG TREATMENTS

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ST. PETERSBURG -- The state has ordered a controversial drug-treatment group to stop forcing teen-agers into treatment or risk losing its license, according to published reports Friday.

The St. Petersburg Times said a Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services investigation had found Straight Inc. in violation of state laws and its own "corrective action plan" developed last year.

HRS officials said Straight held young people against their will, coerced or tricked them into consenting to treatment, failed to report child abuse and did not provide adequate supervision and medical treatment to clients.

Williams D. Oliver, executive director of Straight, said the program holds children against their will only when they have been ordered into the program by a judge or while waiting for their parents to pick them up.

He said many of the HRS allegations were inaccurate and were based on reports of unreliable witnesses. HRS based its report in part on interviews with more than 100 Straight employees and clients.

"Drug-using kids are out of touch with reality. They lie, and they're wonderful at it. I would not give instant credibility to a drug-using child," Oliver said.

Meanwhile, HRS officials have prepared a copy of an administrative complaint to revoke Straight's license, but Thomas Webster, HRS deputy district administrator, said his agency would give Straight another chance before taking formal action.

HRS renewed the license in June, but began its investigation of the program, which has about 150 clients, when it received complaints that clients were being abused. Among the complaints are charges that:

* Thirteen young people were kept in the program against their will, with one being returned in handcuffs by a Pinellas county sheriff's deputy after running away.

* Fifteen youngsters were tricked or coerced into joining the program.

* Five clients told Straight personnel they were sexually abused by their parents but officials did not report the complaints to HRS.

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