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Some 'Straight' clients were illegally held, state officials say

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State health officials said Friday that a private Pinellas County drug treatment program may have illegally held some juvenile clients against their will.

But as a result of their continuing investigation into Straight Inc., the officials said the "procedure" in question "has been suspended."

Now parents of "unwilling" juveniles must obtain a special court order before putting their children in the drug program.

Since it opened in 1976, Straight has required only that parents give their consent when enrolling an unwilling child. But the law establishing the special court actions, known as "involuntary commitment" orders, was passed in 1972.

Officials said the court procedure may make it a little more difficult for unwilling juveniles to be enrolled.

"If a parent tries to enroll a child who is kicking and screaming and doesn't want to go (into Straight), they can't" without the order, said Barbara McPherson, an attorney with the State Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

HRS began its investigation earlier this month after accusations that Straight counselors and officials have mistreated several clients.

James E. Hartz, Straight's executive director, has re-

peatedly denied the charges.

Department officials revealed Straight's questionable enrollment procedure Friday in announcing that the investigation has been extended beyond the two-week time period initially planned.

"Since the newspaper has published that this agency is conducting an investigation, we have received additional complaints (about Straight) that have to be investigated," said Robert G. Marshall, the district HRS administrator for Pinellas and Pasco counties.

Thus far, the investigators have not been able to prove any allegations of mistreatment, Marshall emphasized.

He encouraged the public to contact HRS if they have "information" about Straight. (The Pinellas County phone number is 536-5911.)

"We're not going to thrust forward (hurry the investigation) and do a lousy job," Marshall said. The investigation must be thorough because "HRS's credibility in this community is about sub-zero," he said.

"In no way did the (Straight) board of directors intend to violate any law," Hartz said. Out of about 400 juveniles who have entered Straight since it opened in September 1976, "less than five" were enrolled against their will, he said.

Other juveniles have resisted at first, he said, but "within a matter of days the kid stands up in the (therapy) group and says 'Hey, I'm sorry I resisted.'"

"Most every kid who comes in that door doesn't want to be in the program," said Richard Batchelor, a member of Straight's layman governing board.

Straight is a nonprofit program that uses peer pressure behavioral modification techniques on clients mostly from 12 to 18, although a few are older. It relies heavily on paraprofessional counselors who lack college degrees but have themselves undergone treatment for drug abuse and say they have been cured.

Judges frequently have ordered delinquent juveniles into Straight as an alternative to jail. Many parents also have praised the program's effectiveness.

Before parents can get an "involuntary commitment" order, state law requires that a judge rule that the juvenile "is a habitual (drug) abuser . . . (who) has lost the power of self-control . . . has threatened, attempted, or actually inflicted, physical harm on himself or others" or needs medical treatment because of drugs.

Earlier this month in a letter to James Holley, a state drug-abuse official, director Hartz also said that Straight had enrolled a few juveniles "without the execution of a written consent."

Holley said that procedure does not fill state requirements, but attorneys for the drug program may challenge the issue.

Marshall said the investigation probably will continue for several weeks.

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