

Drug program having problems

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ST. PETERSBURG - Straight Inc., the drug treatment organization that's made a national reputation by sorting out the lives of troubled adolescents, has been facing some troubles of its own.

Straight has scaled back some of its programs and hired a new executive director to improve the organization's financial condition. The organization, based in Pinellas County, appears to be taking a corporate approach to collecting client dollars and eliminating extra expense.

During the past two months, Straight has:

Dropped its drug prevention program, which it had started two years ago. Straight is concentrating once again on drug treatment, its original goal.

Shut down its treatment center in Cincinnati on Oct. 1 because the number of new patients was declining. Straight replaced the treatment center with a scaled-down counseling center for former clients.

Witnessed the departure of several top administrators. Not only did the executive director of the prevention and fund-raising arm (the Straight Foundation) resign when prevention was de-emphasized, but his counterpart who oversaw the treatment programs quit as well.

Mel Riddle, until recently the executive director of Straight Inc., said he resigned "when the board made it clear that they wanted to take a new direction. ... The scope of the job was going to be quite a bit different because they were taking two jobs and basically making them into one."

Those weren't the only resignations. Four of the eight program directors at Straight treatment centers across the country quit in the past year.

"Yeah, there's been some turnover in some of our cities," acknowledged Mel Sembler, a local developer and one of Straight's founders. "That's one of the reasons we figured we ought to bring in the new administrator."

The new administrator is Bernadine E. Braithwaite, formerly executive vice president of U.S. Health Corp. Her expertise is in running hospitals, not drug centers. "We wanted to concentrate on someone with a great deal of administrative skills," said Sembler.

Among her tasks will be to improve collections and help Straight get a bigger slice of the health insurance pie. She also is expected to help Straight become more competitive in a marketplace it once had virtually cornered. On Straight's way to its 6,000th customer, the drug counseling industry changed. Hospitals and private clinics began opening their own chemical dependency programs, and, unlike Straight, they spread the word through advertising rather than word-of-mouth. Straight became a bit player in a huge game.

Straight responded in 1985 by forming the Straight Foundation, a separate drug prevention and fund-raising arm. Foundation members could lecture and raise money while the eight treatment programs - in St. Petersburg, Orlando, Atlanta, Dallas, Cincinnati, Detroit, Washington and Boston - were left to help kids kick the habit.

Two directions, however, meant two boards of directors, and sometimes disparate visions.

"The split between the two created some administrative problems that they wouldn't have had" otherwise, said Bill Oliver, the recently resigned executive director of the Straight Foundation. Hiring decisions and physical plant expansions required votes by both boards, he said. While several former staffers said the division was rarely noticed by

Straight's rank and file, it was clear at the top.

Elliott L. Carr, a Pinellas educator and Straight board member, recalls it as "not so much a rift as a difference in the understanding of goals. ... We in the operating company would have needs, programs that we needed to put on, and the foundation board would have needs. It was a philosophical difference of what we needed to do."

It was obvious by midsummer that "something needed to be reshuffled," said the Rev. Priit Rebane, a board member.

The boards met and decided to concentrate on treatment. Explained Tampa lawyer Joseph Garcia, another board member: "You do what you do best."

"What happened is we lost our focus a bit," Sembler said. "The board decided we couldn't do two things at once ... so we decided we were going to focus on treatment at this point."

[Illustration]

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; Caption: MEL SEMBLER

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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