

## **Straight's new license good for 90 days only**

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### **Document Text**

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ST. PETERSBURG - State officials concerned about conditions they observed during a recent visit to Straight Inc. have given the drug and alcohol treatment program only a 90-day license renewal.

The Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) won't grant a full one-year renewal until officials have inspected the program Aug. 22 to determine if recommended changes have been made, according to a report sent to Straight earlier this week.

The HRS report cited a lack of client privacy, improper restraining methods and inadequately maintained records in denying the full year's renewal.

Page Peary, vice president for operations of Straight, said the criticisms are unfounded.

"What the document suggests is that the gentleman who made the report has a poor understanding of a therapeutic community," Peary said. "I am beginning to think this a philosophical problem . . ."

Straight was founded in 1976 by St. Petersburg developers Mel Sembler and Joe Zappala. The program is for adolescents who are dependent on alcohol and drugs.

Treatment, which can last a year or more, relies heavily on peer pressure and a boot-camp atmosphere to alter a client's lifestyle away from drugs and alcohol. Critics have charged that the program uses brainwashing, and elements of the program were changed after Straight paid \$220,000 in a lawsuit by a young man who claimed to have been held against his will for several months.

Despite criticism, the program has grown to eight cities in addition to St. Petersburg. The two founders, both prominent Republican party fund-raisers, have been nominated as ambassadors - Sembler to Australia and Zappala to Spain. Sembler is now the organization's chairman of the board.

The HRS report singles out Straight's use of clients to restrain other clients forcibly and the lack of privacy for clients in the bathroom and on the telephone.

"In case record #2960 it was documented that a client has a black belt in karate and participates in all takedowns and restraints," the report states. "We are unilaterally opposed to children restraining other children and strongly recommend the practice stop."

Peary said that in a therapeutic community, patients help each other to progress, which includes restraining one another when they become belligerent or try to run.

The HRS inspectors were also critical of reports from clients who claimed to have been unable to telephone HRS without being monitored during the calls and having to explain to the Straight staff the reasons for the calls.

"Five times a day these people have a chance to communicate with professional staff, give their complaints, even leave the program if they wish," Peary said.

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### **Abstract (Document Summary)**

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By KENNETH S. ALLEN  
Times Staff Writer

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