

## TOUGH TACTICS OF 'STRAIGHT' DRUG PROGRAM DRAW FIRE

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YORBA LINDA, CA. - The teen-age girl's lips tremble and her eyes brim with tears as she looks at her father across a large, windowless room in a warehouse.

She stands among several dozen adolescents who sit rigidly in rows of blue plastic chairs. Parents sit in similar rows of chairs facing the youngsters. The girl's father is standing. He speaks to his daughter through a microphone.

"I get the feeling you're hopeless," he says in a flat, angry tone. "I love you."

"I love you, Dad."

This is family night at Straight Inc., a Florida-based national drug treatment program for adolescents that has come to California with the promise of putting parents back in control of their dope-using children.

Thousands of desperate parents across the country have turned to the organization, one of the largest live-in drug treatment programs for adolescents in the nation. Now, after setting up its first California treatment center here, Straight is eager to expand throughout the state. CLIENT ABUSE

But in several other states, including Virginia, Florida, Ohio, Massachusetts and Texas, Straight has been accused of seriously abusing its clients, according to lawsuits, licensing documents, police reports and interviews. Some former clients complain of being held prisoner by Straight. Others say they were screamed at, spat upon, punched, kicked, tied up, held spread-eagled on the floor and even gagged with feminine hygiene pads as punishment.

Timothy J. Kelleher, assistant vice president of operations for Straight, maintains that complaints of abuse are relatively few, considering, he says, that 35,000 children and parents have been involved in the program since it was founded 14 years ago. Moreover, Straight officials say that many complaints come from disgruntled former clients and parents who lack credibility.

Licensing officials in several states have accused Straight of abusive practices, but with the intense nationwide concern over drugs and the need for treatment, none of the facilities has been shut down by authorities.

In Florida, for example, Straight was put on probation last year because of alleged mistreatment of clients, but a regular operating license was granted later.

"I feel . . . that things will work out well between us and Straight," said Martha Lenderman, head of Florida's Drug Abuse and Mental Health Office. "We need all the treatment programs we can get with these awful drug problems we have."

Straight's California program, which treats about 60 youngsters, opened last June and is under consideration for a license from the California Department of Social Services.

But some of the organization's methods are against the law in California, according to state officials. For example, Straight's practice of holding minor clients in the program against their will - which is legal in some states - is against the law in California, according to Francine Bremer, an attorney with the state Department of Social Services. And while Straight requires clients to earn private visits with their parents through good behavior, Bremer said juveniles in California have a right to such visits under the law. State officials are also concerned about reports of alleged abuse of clients in other parts of the country.

"We realize they have had problems in the past in other (states)," said Sergio Ramirez, head of the state social services licensing office in Santa Ana, Calif. "(But) they . . . have indicated they intend to comply with the (state) regulations."

Straight was founded in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1976. It has roots in a controversial rehabilitation program for adolescents called The Seed That Flourished in Southern Florida in the early to mid-1970s. Some parents, whose children had been clients in The Seed, helped to found Straight and borrowed some of its techniques, including highly confrontational, all-day mass meetings of clients.

The program uses some conventional treatment techniques such as Alcoholics Anonymous' famous 12 steps toward sobriety. But at the core of the program are the highly confrontational mass "rap" sessions attended by dozens to hundreds of youngsters.

The sessions are held daily for 10 hours or more in large, windowless warehouses where clients - boys on one side of the room and girls on the other - are required to sit straight up in plastic chairs. The proceedings are led by young graduates of the program who work as staff members.

Clients are required to confess in the meetings to drug abuse and related misbehavior. If the confessions are considered genuine, clients get support and encouragement. If not, they are verbally attacked, and if they are uncooperative, they are sometimes grabbed and held on the floor, according to former clients.

"The staff tells the other kids what to do to the clients that don't cooperate," a former client of Straight's program in Stoughton, Mass. told state police last year. "One time, they threw me down on the floor for no reason. They had other kids hold me down. I had bruises on my hip bones and back."

Straight clients are required to move through "phases," earning more and more freedom and outside activity - such as the right to go to school - until graduation, which usually takes about a year, program officials say.

In the first phase - which itself can take as long as a year if a youngster doesn't do well - clients are not allowed to go to school, visit privately with parents, read, watch television or listen to the radio.

Straight officials say that clients are excused from state compulsory education laws with medical leaves for treatment.

At night, the youngsters are transported to "host homes," where they write accounts of their behavior and goals before going to bed.

The program is also an all-consuming activity for parents who are required to attend group meetings twice a week and provide their own dwellings as "host homes" for clients. Parents must equip bedroom windows and doors in their homes with alarms to prevent escapes and are expected to provide food and transportation for clients staying with them.

Some advocates for minors contend that the national mood of fear over drugs has enabled programs such as Straight to violate the human rights and dignity of young people under the banner of keeping them off dope.

Straight's Peary disagrees. "I think we are as committed to child rights as we are to any other process," he said. "(But) I don't think that children have the inalienable right to use drugs."

'Straight' isn't the only rehab program hit by accusations

Los Angeles Times-Washington Post

Straight Inc. opened its drug treatment center for adolescents in California last summer at the request of frantic parents whose children had been stranded in mid-treatment when another rehabilitation program went out of business.

KIDS of Southern California ran its program out of the same Yorba Linda warehouse now used by Straight and employed similar confrontational treatment methods, according to former clients. KIDS operated for more than a year without a state license and was under investigation by state Department of Social Service officials and local police for alleged abuse of clients when it closed.

KIDS of Southern California was run under a franchise granted by Virgil Miller Newton, who was formerly the national clinical director of Straight. KIDS treatment centers in several states have been accused by former clients of alleged abuses similar to the allegations made against Straight.

"That's the same dog with a different leash," said Florida attorney William Chastain, who has filed several suits alleging client abuse against Straight and taken testimony from Newton in a deposition.

Newton maintains that "starry-eyed" social workers and other gullible public officials are deceived by "manipulative" drug addicts who tell "wild stories" about KIDS' treatment methods. He also contends that disgruntled former clients and their parents spread false accusations from state to state.

Newton left Straight in 1983 and the next year opened his own drug treatment program for adolescents in Hackensack, N.J. He called it KIDS of Bergen County and used techniques similar to those employed by Straight.

Using a franchise system, Newton later authorized the opening of KIDS treatment centers in El Paso, Texas, Orange County, Calif., and Salt Lake City.

KIDS has been accused of serious abuse of clients wherever it has operated. For example, the Bergen County prosecutor's office said last March that recurrent complaints have been made against KIDS in that jurisdiction since 1985.

Newton denies such allegations.

- Caption: PHOTOS(1)A girl breaks down and cries during a rap session conducted by Straight Inc., a national drug treatment program for adolescents. In several states, including Massachusetts, Straight Inc. has been accused of seriously abusing its clients. (2)A veteran of

the Straight Inc. program keeps a firm hand on a newcomer.

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