

Drug treatment center under fire

UPI NewsTrack - June 13, 1991

• Author/Byline: DEIRDRE WILSON

• Section: News

The Massachusetts Office for Children accused a branch of Straight Inc., a controversial drug treatment center for adolescents, of beating and abusing its young clients.

But Straight -- based in St. Petersburg, Fla., with 18 treatment programs nationwide -- said the allegations are unsubstantiated and threatened the recoveries of drug-abusing youths.

The allegations are the latest in a series of complaints against Straight centers in several states. Centers in California, Virginia and Texas have faced denial of license, legal action or publicized complaints that youths were abused or neglected.

The state Office for Children said Wednesday it has refused to renew a foster care license for Straight's New England branch in Stoughton, Mass., because of abuses of clients.

The office alleged a youth was punched in the face by a staff member, clients are sometimes 'yelled and spit' at by staff members and other clients, and one youth with scoliosis (curvature of the spine) was forced to sit on the floor for up to 10 hours a day.

Betty McClure, director of the OFC's substitute care licensing division, said the complaints came from parents and children in the program.

The office also accused Straight of keeping slipshod records and overstating the qualifications of staff members.

Joy Margolis, Straight's national vice president of public relations, said the Massachusetts allegations are 'unsubstantiated.'

Straight, she said, offers a five-phase program in which positive peer pressure is used to try to turn teens against drugs and alcohol.

'We expect these kids to accept responsibility for their actions, and most of them never have,' Margolis said. 'It isn't that it's harsh ... It's just that we don't allow them to just continue on with the excuses they usually use to get through life.'

The treatment program consists of a month of separation from family -- when a youth is placed with another family which has experienced a drug abuse crisis -- and then a gradual return to family, school and the community. Group counseling of drug abusers and their families continues throughout the treatment, Margolis said.

'The only time there's any kind of physical pressure as far as restraints is when a child becomes violent or out of control,' she said. 'Our counselors are trained in these methods.'

California state officials also denied a license to a Straight center last year, citing evidence of 'unusual punishment, infliction of pain and humiliation, mental abuse and withholding medication.'

A federal court in Virginia ruled in 1983 that a Straight client was held in the program against his will and ordered Straight to pay him \$220,000.

In Texas, two former Straight clients complained of physical abuse, including one woman who alleged a feminine-hygiene pad was shoved into her mouth during a group meeting.

Margolis said Straight is concerned about all abuse allegations and wants them thoroughly investigated. But she said, in many cases, youths are making accusations because they are angry they have been placed in the program.

'It's sad,' she said. 'We do a lot of good. We save many lives... This kind of thing really puts it in jeopardy.'

• Dateline: BOSTON

• Record: 1991-06-13-4455676785600

• Copyright: Copyright (c) 1991, United Press International, Inc., All rights reserved.