

Drug program fears jury award will result in its financial ruin

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ST. PETERSBURG — Straight Inc. will be financially "devastated" unless a \$721,000 judgment against the drug treatment program is overturned, a spokeswoman for the program has predicted.

Jurors awarded the money Thursday to Karen Norton, who sued over abuse she said she suffered during her 17-month stay in the controversial drug treatment program eight years ago. Norton, 25, said she was held against her will in the program in 1982 and 1983.

There is no way of telling how many former patients may eventually sue over treatment methods that spokeswoman Joy Margolis says Straight no longer uses.

If others sue and juries are inclined to make similarly huge awards, Margolis said, "no organization could continue to sustain it."

What's more, bad publicity causes patient admissions to slack off, she said. And the non-profit organization relies heavily on client fees to maintain its financial stability, Margolis said.

"If you draw it to its logical conclusion," she said, "a lot of kids won't receive treatment."

Straight will appeal the jury's award, Margolis said.

Of \$721,000 awarded, \$615,000 was earmarked by jurors specifically as punishment for "malice, moral turpitude, wantonness and recklessness."

Margolis said Straight's insurance company will not pay such damages. So the drug treatment program may be forced to scare up some fast cash.

Norton's lawyers estimate that Straight's assets — including real estate in Cincinnati, St. Petersburg, Orlando and Atlanta — total between \$2.1 and \$2.7 million.

But Straight doesn't own most of that property outright, and the buildings aren't even marketable since they were specially designed as drug treatment centers, William Rutger, Straight's lawyer, said last week.

Senior Judge Joseph P. McNulty, who presided over the two-week trial that concluded Thursday, is entitled to review the jury's award to decide if it should stand.

McNulty said he can reduce the award if he is convinced it is excessive. But Norton could opt for a new trial rather than accept any reduction, McNulty said.

Norton was once offered \$7,500 to settle the 5-year-old lawsuit — an offer she refused, according to Karen Barnett, one of Norton's lawyers.

Over the last decade, Straight has agreed to pay tens of thousands of dollars in settlements to former patients who complained of being held against their will. One former patient was awarded \$220,000 in 1983

in a federal lawsuit.

But this week's jury award is the largest in Straight's history. Jurors concluded the organization was liable for assault and battery, false imprisonment, negligence and intentional infliction of emotional distress in Norton's case.

"Not only are we paying for the sins of people in the past," Margolis said, "but it's even worse because they are not paying."

Norton complained in her lawsuit that she was thrown against a wall by Virgil Miller Newton, a minister who once ran Straight's St. Petersburg program.

Newton has since run controversial drug treatment programs in Texas and New Jersey. Those programs have gotten into trouble with local officials in both states because of allegations of abuse of patients.

Margolis said Straight's eight treatment programs — each of which serves about 100 clients — are no longer the places they once were.

The organization, headquartered in St. Petersburg, evolved in the early 1970s from another drug treatment program called The Seed.

Over the years, Straight has gotten into hot water for using patients to restrain other patients and for holding patients in the program against their will.

The combination of emotional purging and rigid rules Straight uses has caused some critics to accuse the program of brainwashing.

The long-term program treats 12- to 21-year-olds by using intense peer pressure, rigid house rules and counseling methods similar to those used by Alcoholics Anonymous. Patients spend their days in large and small counseling groups, and their evenings in homes with other Straight patients.

Despite the criticism, Straight boasts a 65 percent success rate, considered extremely high for a drug rehabilitation program.

Straight's St. Petersburg program was accredited two years ago by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, a 39-year-old independent commission that scrutinizes hospitals and mental health treatment programs.

Margolis said each of Straight's programs is now accredited. Its board of directors includes the names of United States ambassadors and prominent local developers Melvin Sembler and Joseph Zappala.

Straight had a run-in last year with the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) over a state report that said patients only had limited use of an abuse hot line, bathroom privileges were restricted, and some records were sloppy or incomplete.

But Straight's state license has since been renewed twice with no serious problems, according to HRS files.