

# Tampa Bay Me

## Jury awards \$721,000 to ex-client of drug

By MIKE COPELAND  
Tribune Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Jurors Thursday awarded a woman \$721,000 after agreeing she was assaulted and held against her will eight years ago by employees of the Straight Inc. drug treatment program.

Karen Norton fought back tears, hugged her lawyers and thanked jurors after the stunning award — the largest ever in Straight's controversial history and \$55,000 more than her lawyers asked for.

"At last someone listened to me," said Norton, 25. "I'm happy. I waited a long

time."

The three-man, three-woman jury decided in a little more than two hours that Straight was liable for assault and battery, false imprisonment, negligence and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

Jurors said Norton should receive \$106,000 in compensatory damages for her 17-month ordeal as a client of Straight. They awarded \$615,000 in punitive damages.

A mediator once recommended that Norton be given \$12,500 to settle the 5-year-old lawsuit, said William Rutger, Straight's Clearwater lawyer. But Straight and Norton

couldn't agree.

Senior Judge Joseph P. McNulty told jurors their verdict "is certainly justified in the evidence."

Straight spokeswoman Joy Margolis said Thursday night the organization will appeal the award.

"The compensatory damages were excessive and the punitive damages were inexcusable," Margolis said. Noting that the dispute involves incidents that occurred eight years ago, Margolis said, "Straight is a completely different organization from what we were then.

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"We're very sorry to see this happen

because we have helped thousands of families and kids get off drugs, and it's a very worthwhile program," Margolis said.

Norton's lawsuit said she was harassed, embarrassed and mocked by Straight employees bent on humiliating and upsetting her. She said she was forced to remain in the program — where relatives had placed her — despite repeated pleas to leave.

She was thrown up against a wall by the program's assistant director, strip-searched and jeered by staff members, intimidated, bruised, cursed and forced to exercise despite complaining she was in pain, according to her lawsuit.

"What we were really against, basically, was that she was 18 years old and that she was not permitted to leave," juror Katherine Haynes of St. Petersburg said Thursday.

Straight attorney Rutger told jurors that "confrontation" was essential for effective drug treatment.

Rutger also emphasized during closing arguments Thursday that Straight's approach to drug treatment has evolved dramatically since the "horse and buggy" days when Norton was admitted.

Karen Barnett, one of Norton's lawyers,

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# Drug program to appeal award

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told jurors Straight had no business "experimenting with human life."

The national program, founded in 1972, is headquartered in St. Petersburg.

Straight has agreed to pay tens of thousands of dollars in settlements to other former patients who complained of being held by Straight against their will.

One former patient was awarded \$220,000 in 1983 in a federal lawsuit.

In 1984, Straight officials were warned by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Servic-

es (HRS) to stop coercing teenagers into drug treatment or risk losing their state license.

Last year, Straight's license to operate in Florida was renewed by HRS for three months instead of the customary year. HRS cited a state report that patients only had limited access to an abuse hot line, bathroom privileges were restricted, and some records were sloppy or incomplete.

But the license has since been renewed twice — each time for a full year, HRS district spokeswoman Elaine Fulton-Jones said last week.

"We've had real success in working together with them," she said.