Straight Inc. told to close Virginia treatment center

By PAT DUNNIGAN Tribune Staff Writer

CLEARWATER — A Straight Inc. drug treatment facility in Springfield, Va., has been ordered closed after a series of violations that include the failure to promptly report the alleged sexual abuse of a 13-year-old client.

Straight officials have until March 21 to shut down the program or request a formal hearing of the decision, according to a letter Straight officials received Monday from the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services.

Straight Inc., which is headquartered in St. Petersburg, has eight chapters across the United States.

The organization has been the subject of numerous complaints and lawsuits — locally and in other states — stemming from the program's controversial treatment practices. Pinellas County jurors awarded \$721,000 in November to a former Straight client in St. Petersburg who alleged she was abused and held against her will.

Jacqueline Ennis, an assistant commissioner with the Virginia

mental-health department, said the decision to close that facility came after a recent review uncovered 76 violations of state license requirements less than a year since it narrowly avoided losing its license by agreeing to undertake reforms.

"They have a history of problems with us in terms of licensure," she said. "It seems to have been moving toward a crescendo."

In December, state monitors found inadequate health records of employees and clients, inadequate fire safety procedures and a lack of any educational program for schoolaged children undergoing drug treatment, she said.

Virginia officials say Straight waited almost a month to report the alleged sexual abuse of a 13-year-old boy in the program by a 19-year-old client.

Straight officials could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

The program also failed to meet the terms of the agreement reached last July when state officials asked Straight to report steps taken to ensure that past violations did not recur, Ennis said.