

Treatment center's headquarters closing

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ST. PETERSBURG - As quietly as Straight Inc. closed its drug treatment center three weeks ago, the St. Petersburg-based national headquarters quickly is following suit.

Bruce Epstein, a physician and member of Straight's board of directors, confirmed Thursday the national headquarters is closing.

Epstein, a medical adviser to Straight, said he learned of the pending shutdown from national Executive Director Bernadine Braithwaite. He said he didn't know any details of the closing or how it would affect other treatment centers still operating.

Straight officials and most members of its board of directors did not return telephone calls. A woman who answered the telephone at Braithwaite's home said her mother was out of town.

Straight, which at one time had at least eight adolescent drug treatment centers in the United States, now has only two centers open.

Kathleen Cone, administrator for the center near Atlanta in Marietta, Ga., was unaware of any change in the status of the national headquarters. But she said from a treatment perspective, the closing "would have no impact" on her operation.

Cone said her center operates independently because it must maintain client records at the site and must follow state operating requirements.

Kathy Radgens, clinical director at the center near Detroit in Southfield, Mich., said she could not comment until she had more information.

The St. Petersburg treatment center and national headquarters office building, both at 3001 Gandy Blvd., are for sale.

Real estate broker Fred O'Callaghan said he will meet today with Straight executives to determine an asking price for the property. The property appraiser's office lists the value of the land and buildings as \$1,088,900.

The defunct St. Petersburg drug treatment program is being investigated by the state, according to a spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS). And it's being investigated by the FBI, according to a former client and parents of former clients who say they have been questioned by an agent about allegations of double and triple billing.

HRS would not provide details of the state investigation and the FBI as a matter of policy will not confirm or deny any possible investigations.

In an April 23 letter to HRS, Straight said it closed the St. Petersburg treatment center because there were only 16 clients. At one time, the facility had as many as 325 clients.

In the letter, Joy Margolis, vice president of public affairs for Straight, attributed the low number of clients to "the depressed economy and lack of financial resources of many families."

Ten of the clients were transferred to the Georgia center, Cone said.

Founded in 1976 by former U.S. Ambassador Mel Sembler, Straight has suffered from several costly lawsuits stemming from allegations of physical abuse.

Sembler's secretary said Thursday he would not return telephone calls about Straight.

Straight uses intensive peer pressure and a 12-step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous to rehabilitate drug users. Its unorthodox methods have been challenged by former clients and parents of former clients - many of whom formed a nationwide network against the organization.

In its heyday, the St. Petersburg center was visited by then-Vice President George Bush in 1987 and former first lady Nancy Reagan in 1982.

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Page: 1

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