

FBI seeks dope on fraud claims at rehab center - Three people with ties to Straight Inc. say they have been contacted by the federal agency.

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Author: ANNMARIE SARSFIELD, Tribune Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG - A former client and staff member of Straight Inc. says the FBI is investigating allegations of insurance fraud at the drug rehabilitation program.

Two parents of former clients say they, too, were contacted this week by an FBI agent and asked for details about alleged double- and triple-billing by Straight, a national program headquartered in St. Petersburg.

Straight uses intensive peer pressure and a 12-step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous to rehabilitate adolescent drug users, according to an organization brochure.

The program, which closed its St. Petersburg treatment center about two weeks ago, has been praised by some for saving lives and successfully sued by others who alleged physical abuse.

Straight also is being investigated by the state, but a spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services would not provide details.

As a matter of policy, the FBI won't confirm or deny any possible investigations, said Brian Kensel, an FBI spokesman in Tampa. Officials at Straight Inc. did not return repeated telephone calls.

Richard Bradbury of Tampa, the former client and founder of an activist group against Straight, said he was shocked to receive the FBI's call. His group has tried for years to prompt an investigation, he said.

Bradbury, scheduled to meet with an FBI agent Friday, said Straight charged for services not rendered and double- and triple-charged for other items.

For example, Bradbury said, clients in the program write daily progress reports on other clients. Then, a staff member - often a person whose only qualification is having completed the Straight program - tallies the recommendations to determine whether the client deserves to have additional privileges or move to the next phase of treatment.

Bradbury has client bills showing charges of thousands of dollars for a "daily intensive group therapy" conducted by clients. Although the bills have an attending physician listed, Bradbury said no physicians are involved in the sessions.

Bradbury also said peers, not a doctor, do the \$300 initial evaluation.

Fees paid by parents can range from \$10,000 to \$14,000 a year, he said, and Straight later bills insurance companies for many of the same services.

Barbara [REDACTED], whose son was in the program from 1989 to 1990, said Straight charged her \$450 a month to cover the cost of her son staying in a host home. The clients attend the day program at the Straight treatment center, then spend nights with other clients' families.

For her efforts as a host, [REDACTED] said, "I didn't get a cent." At that time, host parents were supposed to receive \$7 a day for each child staying in their home, she said.

[REDACTED] said she also will meet Friday with an FBI agent.

Dee [REDACTED], whose son was in the program from 1990 to 1991, said she'll meet with the FBI this week.

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Page: 1

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