

Drug program attacked in HRS report

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PINELLAS PARK — The license of a controversial alcohol and drug treatment facility has been renewed for only three months following a state report criticizing the use of patients to overpower and restrain other patients and their limited access to an abuse hot line.

Straight Inc. of Pinellas Park also restricted bathroom privileges for some patients and kept sloppy and incomplete treatment records, according to an inspection report released this week by the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. Similar items were cited after an HRS inspection a year ago, records show.

The problems were considered so extensive that HRS officials have renewed Straight's license for only three months, not the standard year granted to the county's 26 other treatment facilities, said Bob Holm of the HRS Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Program Office in St. Petersburg.

Melvin F. Sembler, Straight's executive director, discounted the report as another unfounded attack on what he said is the nation's most successful alcohol and drug abuse rehabilitation program.

"I don't view it as a problem," Sembler said. "We've been going through this sort of thing for 15 years. I don't worry too much about it. It's the best program in the United States."

The report stems from a May 23 HRS site review which included interviews with patients and staff and a study of the patients' clinical records and Straight's policies and procedures.

Records of nine patients that were reviewed were found to be incomplete or out of compliance. Some lacked proper dates or signa-

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tures. In other cases, patients with serious problems — including one rape victim — were not receiving the special counseling they required, the report stated.

Some patients had to get permission from staff before they could use a telephone to call the HRS abuse hot line, according to the report. Others were prevented from using the hot line until they explained the reason for the call during a group counseling session.

Both violate HRS statutes, which mandate that patients at a treatment facility must have free access to the hot line, Holm said.

Many of Straight's staff members weren't aware there were any restrictions, he said.

Straight's license will be reviewed again in August to see if corrections have been made, Holm said. Straight officials also have 30 days to respond to the allegations and suggested corrections included in the report.

“Before we're going to grant them a regular license, they're going to have to do some work,” Holm said.

The report stated that in one instance a Straight patient with a black belt in karate routinely helped staff members restrain prob-

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HRS examines some aspects of program

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tem, teenagers — a practice HRS “unilaterally opposes,” said Michael Becker, district administrator for HRS in Pinellas and Pasco Counties.

Several other instances of patients restraining patients were found during the review, according to the report.

Becker said HRS officials are changing the state's administrative code to prohibit the practice, which often can lead to injury.

“For us, it's a serious concern,” he said. “A lot of it is involved in their concept of peer counseling. But it takes peer counseling a step beyond what it should be.”

Sembler, a shopping center developer from Treasure Island who recently was picked by President Bush to be the ambassador-designate to Australia, founded Straight in 1976. The program started in Pinellas Park and has expanded nationwide.

Straight treats 12- to 21-year-olds by using intense peer pressure, rigid house rules and counseling methods similar to those used by Alcoholics Anonymous. The non-profit organization boasts a 65 percent success rate, considered extremely high for a drug rehabilitation program.

President George Bush called Straight “inspiring” when he visited the Pinellas Park facility at 3001 Gandy Blvd. in March 1987 and former First Lady Nancy Reagan offered similar praise when she visited in 1982.

But critics accuse Straight of brainwashing and physically abusing patients, charges that have sparked at least five lawsuits against the organization. At least two have been settled. Straight officials denied those allegations, and HRS has no confirmed reports of abuse at the facility.