

Critical report 'naive,' says drug center official

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PINELLAS PARK — A state report critical of the methods used by Straight Inc., an alcohol and drug treatment center, is a naive, ignorant swipe at the program, a spokesman for the center said.

The report, released this week by the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, chastised the controversial program for using patients to subdue and restrain other patients, limiting their access to an abuse hot line, restricting bathroom privileges and haphazard record keeping.

As a result, HRS renewed the facility's license for only three months — not the standard one year granted to rehabilitation pro-

grams in the county.

"We see the comments as fairly naive and fairly irrelevant," said Page Peary, Straight's vice president of operations. "The whole document reveals a lack of understanding. It's disrespectful of what we do. It is not going to alter what we do."

The HRS report was based on a May 23 site review at Straight that included interviews with patients and staff and scrutiny of the facility's treatment records and policies.

Peary said many of the report's conclusions simply were untrue or exaggerated.

Using restraints to subdue out-of-control patients is always a last resort, and other patients assist only

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Program has 30 days to file response

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said patients have access to the HRS abuse telephone hot line at least five times a day and sometimes must ask a program counselor for permission to leave a treatment session to use the phone.

But Bob Holm, of the HRS Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Program in St. Petersburg, said staff members routinely ask patients to overpower and restrain other patients, a practice that often can lead to injury. Holm, who led the HRS inspection, also said state statutes require that people in treatment programs must have free access to the abuse hot line at all times.

In his report, Holm said the several patients in the first phase of Straight's program were sometimes restricted from using the bathroom or, when they were allowed to use the bathroom, they were observed by staff or other patients.

Peary denied that was the case. Some patients are monitored though, he said, to make sure they do not intentionally harm themselves or use drugs or alcohol.

"This is not done to restrict their privacy. It is done to keep them sober," Peary said.

"We're dealing with kids that are killing themselves with drugs." The report also stated that records of nine patients that were reviewed were incomplete.

Peary admitted that some problems exist with record keeping, but said they are minor and are common in almost all treatment centers.

Straight has 30 days to file a written response to the report. In the meantime, Peary said, he will try to educate HRS officials on proper and successful treatment programs for drug abuse.

HRS will reinspect the facility in August to see if all the problems cited in the report were corrected, Holm said.

Straight uses a combination of intense peer pressure and counseling methods similar to Alcoholics Anonymous to treat 12- to 21-year-olds for alcohol and drug abuse. The non-profit organization has received praise from President Bush and former first lady Nancy Reagan.