

Treatment center outlines policy changes

By PHIL WILLON
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ST. PETERSBURG — A controversial drug and alcohol treatment center in Pinellas Park is correcting problems cited by state inspectors in June, although an official continued to call the state "naïve."

Straight Inc. was criticized by the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) in a June 12 report for allowing patients to overpower and restrain other patients, limiting access to an abuse hot line, restricting bathroom privileges and sloppy record keeping.

Straight filed a "Correction Action Plan" Wednesday with HRS officials in St. Petersburg, outlining the changes it has made in staff training and in policies and procedures mandated by HRS.

But Page Peary, Straight's vice president of operations, said that most of the problems HRS cited were petty. He also denied that Straight allowed patients to subdue and restrain one another, except in cases of self-defense.

"These are so irrelevant and naïve," Peary said Thursday. "It's our job to get HRS back into

the facility so we can educate them about what is relevant."

Straight uses 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, located at 3001 Gandy Blvd., started in St. Petersburg and has chapters nationwide.

HRS officials were reviewing Straight's response Thursday and were not prepared to comment about it, said agency spokeswoman Elaine Fulton-Jones.

As a result of the critical HRS report, Straight's operating license was renewed for only three months, not the standard year granted to all other treatment programs in the county. The center is scheduled for another inspection Aug. 22, at which time a new license may be issued, Fulton-Jones said.

"We're working with them," Fulton-Jones said. "We don't want to lose any program we have available."

According to the HRS report, one Straight patient with a black belt in karate routinely helped staff members "take down" and restrain problem

patients. Peary said that allegation came from a patient and was false.

But Bob Holm, of the HRS Alcohol Drug Abuse and Mental Health Program Office in St. Petersburg, said the information came from a report written by a staff member. Holm led the HRS inspection at Straight.

The report also stated that some patients were required to ask staff for permission to use the abuse hot line or were watched when they called. Patients in Straight's first phase also were restricted from using the bathroom, and were watched when they did.

Straight's staff has been instructed to give patients immediate and unmonitored access to the abuse hot line, the response states. All patients now have unimpeded bathroom privileges with privacy.

The HRS report criticized Straight for keeping incomplete treatment records, but Peary said that has been corrected.

Straight's Orlando facility has received similar criticism from HRS, and also is correcting problems, said Steve Konicki, spokesman for HRS in Tallahassee.