

Locally based treatment center closes in Virginia

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A private treatment center that used controversial mental and physical techniques to keep children from using drugs has stopped operating in Virginia.

Straight Inc. dropped its attempt to regain a Virginia operating license, choosing instead to transfer the program to nearby Columbia, Md., Straight Inc. spokeswoman Joy Margolis said.

Straight Inc., which is headquartered in St. Petersburg, has eight chapters across the United States.

The organization has been the subject of numerous complaints and lawsuits locally and in other states - stemming from the program's controversial treatment practices. Pinellas County jurors awarded \$721,000 in November to a former Straight client in St. Petersburg who alleged she was abused and held against her will.

Straight evolved in the early 1970s from another drug treatment program called The Seed.

The Virginia program has until this Tuesday to find new housing for its clients, according to the state agency that oversees the program. The state will file suit against any host home still operating in Virginia after that date.

Straight houses clients with host families, usually parents of children already in treatment.

The program, which faced allegations of patient abuse, was to have a hearing on progress to correct state licensing violations Tuesday.

"They do not have a license to operate in Virginia as a result of waiving that hearing," said Jacqueline M. Ennis, assistant commissioner of the state Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services.

"It was apparent to us that we wouldn't have a fair hearing no matter what," Margolis said. She said the program had met all state requirements by last week.

Straight Inc.'s Springfield office closed Friday, the mental health department said.

The program had worked to correct several violations, including physical restraint of rebellious clients, but still faced problems in renewing its license, Ennis said.

Straight's facility in Springfield was ordered closed earlier this year after a series of violations that include the failure to report promptly the alleged sexual abuse of a 13-year-old client by a 19-year-old also in the program.

In December, state monitors found inadequate health records of employees and clients, inadequate fire safety procedures and a lack of any educational program for school-aged children undergoing drug treatment, Ennis said.

Straight clients range in age from 12 to 21 and pay about \$14,000 for treatment, which lasts about a year on average, Margolis has said.

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

During the past 10 years, the organization has agreed to pay tens of thousands of dollars to former patients who complained of being held against their will. But Straight officials say the complaints stem from treatment practices no longer used.

Margolis said 60 percent to 70 percent of patients do not return to drug use after participating in the program. Patients can spend a year or more in treatment.

""It's successful because it's long-term. It changes them," she said.

Critics say the program's philosophy that includes breaking down patients' defenses about drug use can be dehumanizing.

Ennis cited the program's use of ""spit therapy," where children could spit on one another as a way of reducing egos and the need for social acceptance. ""We thought that was inappropriate," she said.

Virginia clients or their parents lodged dozens of complaints about the program in recent years, Ennis said. State investigators visited the program's offices within the last six weeks because of two complaints, she said.

""Some of their practices posed a danger to the kids," Ennis said. ""For example, clients could restrain other kids, hold down other kids who wanted to leave the program."

""We don't do that. We were in compliance on that," Margolis said.

Ennis said other state complaints focused on Straight Inc.'s housing program.

Margolis said the program had stopped using all methods officials in Virginia found objectionable.

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