

Treatment center lives in name only

The Tampa Tribune - Wednesday, July 7, 1993

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ST. PETERSBURG - The last remaining Straight Inc. drug treatment centers in Georgia and Michigan have closed and reopened under new names, leaving the St. Petersburg-based corporation alive in name only.

Straight still is listed on state documents as a viable corporation in Florida, keeping the door open for possible reorganization.

The St. Petersburg treatment center closed in April after the clientele dropped to 16. At one time, the facility had as many as 325 clients. The adjacent national headquarters, once administrative home for 12 treatment centers across the United States, shut its doors in May.

The program has been the source of heated debate since its inception in 1976. Some claim Straight was cult-like, abused clients and held them against their will. At the same time, Republican administrations touted Straight as a model rehabilitation program.

Late last week, Straight officials in St. Petersburg hired a New York-based company to serve as Straight's registered agent. Registered agents are identified on state corporation documents and serve as a clearinghouse for lawsuits filed against the company they represent.

By retaining a registered agent, Straight will be able to keep its corporation alive in Florida, said Tanya Villar, a senior customer specialist with C T Corporation System in Plantation. Her company, which now represents Straight, serves as registered agent for more than 75 percent of Fortune 1,000 companies in the United States and represents 20,000 Florida companies.

"In a year or two, if they want to reopen, they're still in good standing in the state," Villar said.

Officials from Straight did not return telephone calls Tuesday and have declined to comment since the center closed in April.

When the national headquarters quietly ceased operations, it left two remaining treatment centers in limbo. Both the Marietta, Ga., and Southfield, Mich., centers have divorced themselves from Straight Inc. and become separate entities.

The facility near Atlanta re-incorporated as The Phoenix Institute for Adolescents Inc. The center near Detroit is now Pathway Family Center. Both name changes went into effect July 1.

"The clients officially withdrew [from Straight] and readmitted themselves to our facility," said Kathleen Cone, who was Straight's administrator at the Georgia facility and is now administrator for The Phoenix Institute.

Helen Gowanny, administrator for the Michigan center, could not be reached for comment.

Though Cone said there were "no hard feelings" between her staff and Straight officers, she is clearly happy for a fresh start under a new name.

Asked what the future for Straight Inc. might be, she replied: "I really don't care . . . I wouldn't hazard a guess as to what they're going to do."

Edition: METROPOLITAN

Section: FLORIDAMETRO

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Index Terms: DRUG ABUSE PROGRAM ; STRAIGHT INCORPORATED ; BUSINESS CLOSING ; HISTORY

Dateline: ST. PETERSBURG

Record Number: 063

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