

Straight chief twisted arms, report shows - Politically connected Mel Sembler had help from state senators to get a license renewed.

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ST. PETERSBURG - Former U.S. Ambassador Mel Sembler and unnamed state senators pressured a state agency into renewing Straight Inc.'s license despite a staff recommendation against it, an agency inspector general's report has found.

A seven-month investigation into the defunct St. Petersburg-based drug rehabilitation center, which Sembler founded, also revealed "a definite pattern of abuse or excessive force used against clients at Straight facilities." The probe stemmed from a complaint by Richard Bradbury, a former client and staff member.

The gossipy report - riddled with unsubstantiated allegations and innuendos - details various conversations in which a high-level state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) official told his staff to license Straight Inc. regardless of findings in an August 1989 inspection.

The licensing team was ready to recommend the license not be renewed, because Straight had not corrected a number of issues raised at an inspection three months earlier.

Harry Moffitt, an HRS senior human services program specialist, told investigators of threats to fire a staff member who questioned why Florida would allow Straight to continue operating in spite of allegations of withholding medication and food from clients, depriving them of sleep and using excessive force against them. Similar problems forced closure of Straight treatment centers in other states.

Moffitt said when Linda Lewis, a former HRS deputy assistant secretary, brought that fact to the attention of Ivor Groves, he told her, "If you do anything other than what I tell you to do on this issue, I will fire you on the spot."

Groves, a former HRS assistant secretary, denied the conversation to an investigator, and Lewis didn't recall it, the report said. Groves, Lewis and Moffitt could not be reached Wednesday. Sembler and Bernadine Braithwaite, executive director of Straight, did not return telephone calls.

Straight, which once boasted treatment centers in 12 states, closed its St. Petersburg treatment center in April. The adjacent national headquarters closed in May.

Although the findings won't have much significance because Straight is closed, HRS spokeswoman Ellen Dadisman said Wednesday the investigation was completed "to determine if we could have done anything better."

Straight has been simultaneously lauded and lambasted. While the target of numerous lawsuits stemming from allegations of physical abuse and holding people against their will, Straight received kudos from Republican administrations in the 1980s. Contributors. They were rewarded with ambassadorships to Australia and Spain, respectively.

The report says Sembler contacted then-HRS Secretary Gregory Coler several times concerning Straight. "It appears that Mr. Coler then called Dr. Groves about Straight," the report said.

HRS also received telephone calls from state senators, who let it be known they strongly supported the program, "thus exerting a certain influence concerning Straight matters," the report concluded. The senators were not named.

Two of Pinellas County's three state senators at the time, Mary Grizzle, R-Belleair Shore, and Jeanne Malchon, D-St. Petersburg, said they did not make the calls supporting Straight. Curt Kiser, R-Palm Harbor, said he doesn't remember, but it's very unlikely that he would have made such a call.

The HRS investigation also detailed physical abuse or neglect at Straight, including restraining clients who tried to escape or wouldn't sit straight in their chairs for as long as 12 hours; failing to provide follow-up medical treatment; and knowingly placing clients "in a dangerous situation."

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