

Staff admits abuses at ex-drug program

Three former workers at Sarasota's Straight Inc. said clients who resisted being kept against their will were sometimes physically abused.

SARASOTA (UPI) — Staff members of the controversial drug rehabilitation program Straight Inc. admitted in sworn statements clients were physically restrained at times at the Sarasota facility, which since has been closed.

Officials at Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters said such actions were against policy.

The testimony was included in about 600 pages of statements by staff members, parents and former clients questioned by State Attorney James A. Gardner's investigators.

No charges were filed as a result of the investigation, but Straight closed down the Sarasota operation in July, citing continuing criticism from Gardner and a negative public backlash.

Gardner released the statements last week.

Gardner had turned over the results of his investigation to the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services which ordered Straight to write new procedures to protect client's rights, or face loss of its state license.

Straight did so and had its licenses renewed for both St. Petersburg and Sarasota, then opted to close Sarasota. The 47 clients there were transferred to St. Petersburg.

The statements released by Gardner included some by three people who were staff members at the Sarasota facility at the time and who were granted immunity.

Two of them no longer work for Straight, but the third — Chris Cassler — is now an executive staff member at the St. Petersburg headquarters.

The staff members said clients routinely were kept against their will and those who resisted were sometimes grabbed by the neck, pulled by the hair, poked, thrown against walls or sat upon.

Straight's use of peer pressure and intense group confrontation therapy to wean adolescents away from drugs has strong critics and defenders.

Critics contend the group confrontation therapy is little more than brainwashing and that the rights of clients are abused.

Supporters, including parents and former clients, credit Straight with changing anti-social drug uses into well adjusted and highly motivated members of society.

Assistant State Attorney David Levin, who handled the investigation, said treatment policy at Sarasota was controlled from St. Petersburg.

"The Sarasota branch was acting in accordance of approved methods being taught in St. Peterburg," Levin said. "Each staff member indicated that they were acting no differently than what they were taught to do in St. Petersburg. Basically, the bottom line is that we have every reason to believe that they were following policies and treatments dictated by St. Petersburg."