

DRUG TREATMENT CENTER CLOSING - GROUP CLAIMS STATE HARRASSMENT

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A private drug-treatment center said it will close because a state investigation of the program was harassing it.

A state licensing official, however, said parents' complaints of the drug treatment center for adolescents led to the investigation of the Chesapeake branch of Straight Inc.

Administrator Margaret Allen said Thursday that state licensing investigators harassed the center for three weeks.

"They have been in here unannounced, interviewing clients and staff without saying what the issues are," Allen said. "We can't continue to run a quality program with a parade of five or six people in the treatment center on a daily basis."

She said no date had been set for closing the center.

Jacqueline Ennis, an assistant commissioner from the licensing bureau of the state Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse, said a specialist visited the center, and that her findings led to an investigation last week.

Ennis would not detail what the complaints were. Allen said she did not know what the state agency was investigating.

"It may seem to them that it's like harassment, but we feel it is the normal course of the job we are in charge of," Ennis said.

The Chesapeake drug-treatment program, which has 58 clients from Hampton Roads and 24 staff members, is one of eight Straight centers across the country. It does not get state or federal money, and clients enroll in the program.

Straight's method of rehabilitation involves giving older clients increasing authority to influence newcomers through "positive peer pressure."

That method has been the subject of controversy, lawsuits and investigations since Straight was founded in Florida in 1976.

Violations cited at other Straight centers include strip searches of youths in front of their peers; punishing patients by withholding food; depriving clients of sleep, water, food and visits from parents; and failure to report allegations of sexual abuse by other patients.

Straight officials have denied allegations of abuse.

Last week, the state licensing bureau's denied renewal of a license to another Straight center in Springfield. That center has until this week to file an appeal.

Ennis said the center in Springfield and the one in Chesapeake were operating under a court agreement issued last year after parents in the Washington, D.C., area complained about treatment at the Springfield center.

The two centers, which operate under the same methods, were to change the way they restrained clients. "Unqualified individuals, including clients, were allowed to restrain clients if they decided to leave the program," Ennis said. "That's a practice we found to be dangerous." She said in one case a teen-ager's arm was broken.

The centers also were to change the living arrangements of clients. Straight assigns groups of clients to live with parents of clients. Ennis said the facilities were to limit the number of clients living with each host family, and to ensure that the homes were adequate before sending clients to them.

A Chesapeake mother whose 16-year-old son was in the program for less than a month last year said she pulled him out because he was abused.

When he tried to run away from the center, several other clients threw him on the floor to keep him from leaving, she said. When he tried to run away again, another client grabbed him by the shirt collar, burning his neck and ripping off the shirt. The woman's son managed to escape.

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