

DRUG-TREATMENT CENTER TO CLOSE IN CHESAPEAKE

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A private drug-treatment center said Thursday that it would close its doors in the wake of a state investigation against the program.

Margaret Allen, administrator of the Chesapeake branch of Straight Inc., said state licensing investigators had been "harassing" the Greenbrier facility for the past three weeks.

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

Jacqueline Ennis, an assistant commissioner from the licensing bureau of the state Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse, said that a specialist visited the center two weeks ago, and that her findings led to an investigation this week by a team of six specialists.

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. The private facility does not get state or federal money, and a client enrolls 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 it was founded in Florida in 1976.

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

Straight officials have denied allegations of abuse.

The closing of the Chesapeake facility comes on the heels of the state licensing bureau's decision to deny renewal of a license to another Straight center in Springfield last week. That center has until next week to file an appeal.

Ennis said both the center in Springfield and the one in Chesapeake were operating under a court agreement that was 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 teenager'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 the homes.

A Chesapeake mother whose 16-year-old son was in the Straight program for less than a month last year said she pulled him out of the program because he was the victim of abuse while there.

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

"When I found him he was having an asthma attack," said the woman, who asked not to be identified.

The woman said she also objected to parents' having to keep clients in their homes. "You feed them, your electricity bill goes up, your water bill goes up. You have to put in an alarm system, and lock everything up," she said.

Although she was unhappy with the program's methods, the woman said she decided against filing a complaint against the center.

Allen said she was aware of complaints made against other Straight centers, but said the Chesapeake facility was not in violation of any regulations. She said the state investigators were disrupting treatment.

“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.”

Ennis said Straight officials asked the licensing investigators to leave Thursday morning because the decision had been made to close voluntarily.

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

- **Caption:** Photo Straight Inc.'s Margaret Allen Claims harassment

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