

CLOSING OF STRAIGHT BRINGS RELIEF, REGRET \ DRUG-TREATMENT CENTER FOR YOUTHS IS LOVED AND HATED

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Parents responded vehemently Friday to the closing of an adolescent drug treatment program that has been called both a life-saver and an abuser.

Straight Inc., a private drug-treatment center in Chesapeake that uses ``positive peer pressure'' to treat its clients, decided Thursday to close its doors after a three-week state investigation of the center's practices.

While some parents lauded the action, saying the center uses dangerous tactics that threaten the well-being of youths, other parents said the program's rigid structure was responsible for saving their children's lives.

Virginia Beach resident Doug Drummond said his son, now 20, entered the program's Springfield, Va., facility in January 1988 and moved to the Chesapeake center when it opened in July 1989. His son, who spent two years in the program, is free of drugs and back in school, Drummond said. ``It saved my son's life and my whole family's life," he said.

But not all parents were satisfied with the program. One parent was so incensed with the admitting practices of the program that she filed a lawsuit against Straight in federal court last month.

In the suit, Linda [REDACTED] of Virginia Beach said her two children, Autumn and Carlos [REDACTED], were abused during a four-hour visit to the Greenbrier center.

The suit says Carlos [REDACTED] was strip-searched in front of several people, denied permission to use the bathroom and restrained against his will. Autumn [REDACTED] was also strip-searched, was denied food and drink, and was told her mother had abandoned her, the suit says.

The suit charges Straight with assault and battery, false imprisonment and infliction of emotional distress.

``We think this family has a substantial claim against the center, and we're concerned about the practices there," said Linda Laibstain, the family's attorney.

Another mother, who asked not to be identified, said her 14-year-old daughter also was strip-searched during an initial interview at the center.

Meanwhile, the mother was told her daughter would end up being an alcoholic drug addict or commit suicide if she didn't immediately enroll in Straight.

``I said I wanted my daughter back and they said `no.' They said they needed to keep her there," said the woman, who lives in Norfolk. When the mother and daughter were reunited three hours later, her daughter whispered to her, ``Don't leave me here." She had been told her mother was leaving her at the center, the mother said.

``I was completely hysterical by the time I left," the mother said.

Parents' complaints against the center are what led to an investigation by a team of licensing specialists from the state Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse.

Also, the center was operating under a court agreement filed last year ordering the Chesapeake and Springfield centers to change some of their methods of treatment.

Among them were policies that allowed clients to restrain other youths who tried to leave the program. One teenager suffered a broken arm during a restraining episode at a Straight facility, a state official said.

Drummond, however, said he did not object to the restraining policy. His son tried to escape several times and was restrained by other clients. He said his son had been so heavily immersed in drugs before joining Straight, that Drummond lost control of him. ``I was at the point of getting involved with physical violence with him," he said. ``So what's worse? Someone holding onto his belt or me beating him up?"

Drummond said he recently asked his son if he was mistreated in Straight. "He said he wasn't, and that everything he got he deserved," Drummond said.

Straight not only works with adolescents but requires their parents to participate in the program, too. "People think we're a cult, but we're not," said Karin Curtis, who will move her 16-year-old daughter to another Straight facility in Atlanta when the Chesapeake facility closes.

She said some parents did not give the program enough time. "I have bitter feelings that people who withdrew their children from the program made these complaints and caused the rest of us to lose the program."

The Chesapeake drug treatment program, which has 58 clients from Hampton Roads, is one of eight Straight centers across the country. Straight's methods of rehabilitation have drawn controversy and lawsuits since the program was founded in Florida in 1976.

Officials have not announced a date for the Chesapeake center to close.

- Caption: Chart 2 VIEWS OF STRAIGHT "It saved my son's life and my whole family's life." - Doug Drummond, whose son entered Straight's Springfield, Va., facility in January 1988 and moved to the Chesapeake center when it opened in July 1989. A suit filed by Linda ██████ said her two children, Autumn and Carlos ██████, were abused during a four-hour visit to the Greenbrier center. The suit maintains that Carlos ██████ was strip-searched in front of several people, denied permission to use the bathroom and restrained against his will. Autumn ██████ was also strip-searched, denied food and drink and told her mother had abandoned her.

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