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**HEADLINE:** STATE ALLEGES DRUG PROGRAM ABUSED CLIENTS; SOCIAL SERVICES: OFFICIALS CITE COMPLAINTS OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ANGUISH TO DENY LICENSE TO NATIONALLY KNOWN STRAIGHT INC. ORGANIZATION, WHICH TREATS YOUTH, WILL APPEAL.

**BYLINE:** By CARLA RIVERA, TIMES STAFF WRITER

**DATELINE:** YORBA LINDA

**BODY:**

State social service officials, citing numerous allegations of physical and mental abuse, have denied an operating license to **Straight Inc.**, a nationally known adolescent drug treatment program that has come under fire for its confrontational methods.

The Florida-based organization, one of the largest live-in drug programs for youth in the nation, had opened its first California treatment center a year ago in Yorba Linda and had applied for a license as a foster family agency. The facility's license had been pending since its opening in July, 1989.

But in a letter sent to Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters in June, state authorities ordered the facility closed, citing evidence of "unusual punishment, infliction of pain and humiliation, mental abuse and withholding (of) medication," among other violations.

As recently as July 19, the Yorba Linda program was served with notice that it was in violation of state law because it had continued to operate the facility, a misdemeanor that carries a fine of \$200 per day and possible criminal charges.

However, Straight officials said this week that the program has been shut down since the July 19 notice and that they are complying with Department of Social Service orders. Straight officials also strongly denied charges of abuse and said they are mystified by the state's action and will appeal the license denial.

"We have not seen any of the documentation they are referring to so we have no idea what they mean," said Joy Margolis, Straight's vice president for communications. "In the letter that was sent to us they are in error in a lot of things they said. We have been meeting and working with the department since

July of 1989 to make sure that we complied with state laws, and as far as we knew everything was going fine."

Margolis said 68 people, most of them minors, were enrolled in the Straight program at Yorba Linda when it closed. The clients have been released to parents and families, she said.

Kathleen Norris, spokeswoman for the Department of Social Services, said the state's action was based on an extensive investigation and numerous complaints about Straight's tactics. She would not divulge details of the investigation, citing concerns about confidentiality.

Norris acknowledged that Straight officials have not been told of details of the alleged abusive incidents "but that type of thing will be included in the grounds for denial and they will have a chance to be fully heard and respond in front of an administrative law judge," she said.

While Straight has garnered praise for its treatment program from President Bush and Nancy Reagan, among others, it has run afoul of licensing officials in several states for alleged abusive practices.

Investigators in Virginia and Massachusetts are checking allegations of abuse at Straight's Springfield and Boston centers, the Dallas-area program is being monitored, the group was on probation in Florida last year and it has been sued in Ohio.

At the heart of Straight's treatment program are daily "rap" sessions, at which clients are required to sit straight up in plastic chairs for as long as 10 hours. Clients must confess their drug abuse at the sessions, and if uncooperative, they are verbally attacked.

At night, the youngsters are taken to "host homes" -- usually the homes of parents of other Straight clients who have agreed to house the kids for up to a year. The owners of the "host homes" are expected to equip bedroom windows and doors with alarms and other security devices to prevent escape.

California authorities allege that Straight has failed to comply with several state regulations and has violated health and safety code requirements.

"Documentation on file indicates that there have been incidents where children have been subjected (to) unusual punishment, infliction of pain, humiliation, intimidation, ridicule, coercion, threat, mental abuse, or other actions of a punitive nature, including . . . interference with daily living functions such as eating, sleeping, or toileting or withholding of medication," according to a June 27 letter to Straight signed by Fred Dumont, the Department of Social Services' Santa Ana district manager.

The state also alleges that "certification of host homes, placement of children and social work practices" are not in accordance with standards established by the department.

Public records on file at the Santa Ana office contain several complaints from former Straight clients and a physician at a San Bernardino County hospital who had treated a 17-year-old female Straight client. Social Services officials deleted the doctor's name on the public copy of his complaint.

The girl had been taken to Straight for a substance abuse problem, but the doctor said it was "questionable" whether she actually had one, according to the complaint filed July 19.

"She related to me that she was being 'held against her will' at Straight . . . that there was 'a code of silence' where people at Straight were unable to talk with either their families or with anyone on the outside about what transpired in the program," the doctor wrote. "She reported to me that if she did not sit up straight, she would be restrained forcibly and rather violently on the floor with her face down. The staff would then pin her arms and legs up behind her back."

In another complaint dated July 23, a former client relates being "restrained by my mouth being covered and my arms held down, not being able to breath. I advised Straight that I was in pain several times but was denied medical treatment for two and one half weeks . . . I was denied bathroom privileges for up to two to three hours . . . I was afraid to say or do anything wrong for fear of being restrained, yelled at or having my mouth covered."

Margolis said she was unaware of the incidents and said that Straight does not physically abuse or unnecessarily restrain clients.

"Clients," she said, "are not allowed to restrain other clients. Only staff members

(are allowed), and only when it becomes necessary. For example, when a client is physically violent."

Margolis said Straight had not been notified about any complaints "lodged against the California program."

"To our knowledge the (state) has not investigated the situation by going to Straight and asking us about it," she said. "There are two sides to every story. How much of this is accurate?"

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