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HEADLINE: PARENTS PROTEST STRAIGHT'S FATE;
SUBSTANCE ABUSE: DOZENS DEMONSTRATE ANGER AT STATE'S
DENIAL OF LICENSE FOR CONTROVERSIAL YOUTH TREATMENT
PROGRAM.

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DATELINE: SANTA ANA

BODY:

For Steve Ogle the facts are starkly clear: more and more children in California are being sucked into the nightmare of drug and alcohol abuse and more and more will never awaken from its deathly grip.

But the 41-year-old San Dimas father's anger now is aimed not just at drug pushers and the culture that supports them but at state officials who he believes failed California's children by ordering closed the controversial drug treatment program **Straight, Inc.**

"They have arbitrarily and capriciously shut down a program that was providing a lot of help," said Ogle, whose own family, he says, was devastated by his adolescent son's drug use. "I feel like charging (them) with 51 counts of murder, for interfering with the treatment of that many kids."

Ogle and several dozen parents of children in the Straight program held a

candlelight vigil Thursday evening on the steps of the Department of Social Services' Santa Ana office to condemn drug and alcohol abuse but also the state agency's action.

The parents, mostly from Southern California but including several from Northern California, Oregon and Washington, charge that authorities acted more as foe than ally by denying an operating license to Straight, which has seven other treatment centers outside the state.

The Florida-based organization, one of the largest live-in drug programs in the nation, had opened its first California facility in Yorba Linda more than a year ago and had applied for a license as a foster-family agency.

State authorities, after a yearlong investigation, denied the permit, citing allegations of physical and mental abuse in the program, which has come under fire for its confrontational techniques.

Straight is appealing the denial, but no hearing date has been set.

For families whose children had attended the program, the legal arguments have little meaning.

"In Los Angeles, the entire foster-care program is beset with problems, but they are not closing all the homes," said Lucy Becerra, a Los Angeles County social worker whose 17 year-old son is continuing treatment in Straight's Dallas program. "Yet, the state decided to shut down an entire organization with a tremendous success rate."

Virtually all of the families who had children in Straight's Yorba Linda facility decided to transfer them to Straight programs outside of California to continue treatment, for many at great financial and emotional cost, they say. Although their associations with Straight are usually kept confidential, several parents, such as Ogle, Karin Tadjiki and Joan and Bill Weech, and former Straight clients agreed to be interviewed to publicize their concerns.

When they place their children in Straight, parents are expected to become an integral part of the treatment program, meeting regularly not only with their own children but offering support to other patients in the program and each other.

That supportive role is difficult to maintain long distance but virtually all of the parents do, flying monthly to the Dallas, or Washington or St. Petersburg, Fla., programs, where California patients were transferred.

Becerra said she has decided to move to Dallas to be closer to her son and others she had grown close to at the Yorba Linda center.

"My son is strong and he can handle being away from home, but some of the younger kids can't," she said. "I am not going to get the same experience that I would if my son were still here. He is going to grow and mature, and if I'm not there to see those changes in personality he would be like a stranger coming home."

William Thompson, a Mission Viejo father whose daughter also transferred to the Dallas program, says he has had to refinance his home to pay for her expenses and monthly air fares for visits.

"She had just started back to school and was doing well, getting A's, but then she had to withdraw," Thompson said.

The parents say they are prepared to do whatever is necessary to get the program back. "Political action, speaking out, fund raising, demonstrations -- if laws need to be changed we are ready to try to do that," Ogle said.

Straight supporters are particularly upset at the state's insistence that the program follow the guidelines of a foster-family agency, which requires a state operating license.

They argue that Straight's program falls outside any of California's current categories of treatment facilities because at night clients stay with other Straight parents in so-called "host homes." They say the program has been needlessly penalized for that.

State officials disagree.

"We did a review of the Straight operation when they applied . . . and in our estimation it is the correct category," said Fred Dumont, Santa Ana district manager for the Department of Social Services. "I feel sympathetic to the parents' concerns, but we received documented allegations (of abuse) which we

substantiated."

Allegations of abusive behavior have followed the Straight program for years, despite praise from such notables as President Bush, former First Lady Nancy Reagan and others.

The program has come under investigation in several states, was on probation in Florida and has been sued in Ohio.

California investigators received complaints about the Yorba Linda facility and host homes indicating, according to state records, that children had been "subjected to unusual punishment, infliction of pain, humiliation, intimidation, ridicule, coercion, threats, mental abuse . . . and interference with daily living functions such as eating, sleeping and toileting."

However, Straight supporters say such complaints may stem from the natural reactions of kids who have hit bottom but are not yet ready to accept their problems or treatment.

"Those things never happened to me," said Scott Ogle, who graduated from the Yorba Linda program in September. "I have never seen anyone mentally attacked. . . . People show their feelings, but I have never seen anyone tormented."

"Some kids get very upset and lie and some parents believe them," added Jim Henderson, a former Straight patient who is now a counselor in the program.

Sixteen-year-old Kami Harkins of Rowland Heights said that by the time her parents put her in the Straight program she had attempted suicide eight times with various pills. She knew she was in trouble but did not want to blame herself.

"Straight saved my life, and that is what scares me about the program being gone now," she said. "I think a lot of unfortunate people are not going to get the help I got."

GRAPHIC: Photo, COLOR, Straight program supporters stage candlelight vigil outside Santa Ana office of Department of Social Services. MARK BOSTER / Los Angeles Times; Photo, Straight supporters, in back row from left, are Laurie Tayco, Carolyn Moore, Joan and Bill Weech; middle row, Randy Sherwood, Lexie Sherwood and Linda Weech; front, Gary Price and Karin Tadjiki. PETER