Setbacks for Straight



FRED COLLINS

1. May 1983: Federal jury in Virginia awards \$220,000 in damages to former Straight client Fred Collins after deciding he was illegally imprisoned by Straight in St. Petersburg and Virginia.

2. June 1983: State Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services requires Straight to change some practices in Sarasota and St. Petersburg to protect clients' rights and prevent future abuses.

3. July 1983: Straight closes its Sarasota branch and transfers 47 clients to St. Petersburg. Officials blame bad publicity and declining client rolls.

Critics and judges alike have not been kind to Straight Inc. in recent months.

Straight Inc. shuts down its operation in Sarasota

By MILO GEYELIN St. Petersburg Times Staff Write

CLEARWATER - Straight Inc., the highly regarded drug treatment program based in St. Petersburg, has closed its Sarasota branch because of continuing controversy over charges that clients were abused and illegally imprisoned there.

Straight executive director William D. Oliver said Wednesday that the branch will stay closed indefinitely and he criticized the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) for the way the state licensing agency handled the controversy. HRS is responsible for monitoring drug abuse programs such as Straight.

"The prolonged question about the quality, ethics and morals (of the Sarasota branch) has made it an unworkable situation." Oliver said. As a result, Straight has been unable to attract new clients needed to keep the Sarasota branch open, he said.

Straight, which has other branches in Atlanta, Cincinnati and Springfield, Va., is considered by some to be the best drug treatment program in the country. But recently, the program has come under increasing attack from critics who liken its treatment methods to brainwashing. And last May, a federal jury in Alexandria, Va. awarded \$220,000 in damages to a former client who was illegally imprisoned in Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters last vear.

THE CONTROVERSY in Sarasota began last April, after Sarasota State Attorney James A. Gardner released the results of a year-long investigation he conducted into complaints of criminal abuse at-Straight's Sarasota branch. Gardner turned over more than two dozen sworn statements taken from program participants to-HRS's district office in Fort Myers, which is responsible for monitoring Straight's Sarasota branch.

The statements alleged instances of illegal imprisonment, assault and questionable treatment practices, including the use of restricted diets and sleep deprivation as punishment. As a result, HRS districtadministrator Dr. Robert J. Constantine, ordered Straight to change some of its practices.

Early last month, Constantine issued Straight's branch in Sarasota a temporary, 90-day license, after he and Oliver agreedon a host of program changes intended to resolve the alleged problems.

But later in June, state prosecutor. Gardner complained that the changes were

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of enough and that more assurances were needed to protect the rights of clients at Straight.

"WITHOUT SUCH additional assurances, it is difficult to see how you have been able to issue a license to Straight Inc., since it appears that violations of state law can be expected to continue," Gardner wrote in letter dated June 24.

That, said Oliver on Wednesday, "was the straw that broke the camel's back." Last week, Straight's board of directors voted to close the Sarasota branch. Monday night, parents with children in the branch were told of the decision, and Tuesday it was announced publicly in Sarasota. The branch's 50 or so remaining clients were taken to Straight's St. Petersburg head-quarters, Oliver said.

Meanwhile, Straight has asked HRS Inspector General Judy Lyons to investigate how Constantine handled the allegations. In a letter mailed to Lyons on Monday, Oliver accused Constantine's office of failing to investigate the allegations itself and of fueling the controversy by releasing a synopsis of the sworn

statements to the press.

"The process (of reissuing Straight's license) has extended over a protracted period and served only to generate news stories at the expense of families attempting to deal with their drug-dependent members." Oliver wrote.

WITH GARDNER'S recent criticism, Straight is "once again in the center of a controversy," Oliver added. "It is impossible to conduct family therapy in this environment and we are therefore suspending operations in Sarasota pending the outcome of your review."

Constantine, who plans to meet with Lyons today, said Wednesday that he was surprised by Oliver's letter. "They made no complaints about any of my review proceedings," he said. And Gardner said flatly that Straight's complaints are a smoke screen.

Straight's Sarasota branch opened in 1980 and, at its peak, treated 130 clients at a time in large group therapy sessions. But beginning last year, that number began to dwindle and by Monday, the branch had less than 50 clients. Its cash reserves totaled less than \$10,000, according to Oliver.

TUITION AT Straight is \$3,000 for families who live nearby and can provide "foster home" housing. For out-of-town parents, the tuition is \$4,000, said Oliver.

But with no new clients arriving to help keep the program afloat, Oliver said, the Sarasota branch would have run out of

money within 60 to 90 days.

Straight has a net worth of about \$2.9-million, according to Oliver. Most of that money is committed to Straight's St. Petersburg headquarters and its three remaining branches, Oliver said. The program actually has only \$300,000 in cash reserves.

That money, however, is also dwindling. Straight's legal bills defending the lawsuit it lost last May exceeded \$200,000, Oliver said. Though the verdict is being appealed, Straight could also end up having to pay \$220,000 in damages awarded by the jury. Three other lawsuits against Straight are still pending:

Nevertheless, Oliver said Wednesday that Straight will continue to pay \$2,000 a month to maintain the lease on its Sarasota branch. And the program intends to proceed with plans to open a \$125,000 branch

in Orlando next January.