

opinion

A deeper wound

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED OCTOBER 13, 2006

Rosewood's rebuke

When the developmentally disabled are locked away in isolated conditions, physically abused and neglected, and particularly when that mistreatment is long-standing, state authorities have an obligation to intervene. But what happens when the state is both regulator and perpetrator? That's the sad reality of the Rosewood Center, the residential treatment facility in Owings Mills that deserves to be closed as soon as possible. The state Office of Health Care Quality is expected to release a report today detailing the shameful conditions at Rosewood. The office's director has warned that she may recommend suspension of Medicaid funding, and has cited numerous civil rights violations from an excessive use of restraints to a failure to investigate instances of abuse. Her investigators found that Rosewood staff did little to prevent violence or to provide the programming and instruction the facility's residents require.

What's particularly infuriating is that Rosewood's deficiencies have been known for years. It has been chronically understaffed and poorly managed. Advocates for the disabled say Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. needs to set a deadline to close Rosewood in two years, evaluate its 200 current residents and place most in community programs.

As a candidate for governor four years ago, Mr. Ehrlich promised to stop warehousing disabled people in places like Rosewood. And while the governor has brought attention to the challenges facing the disabled community, he hasn't made good on this particular promise. Part of the problem is cost and part is probably politics. Closing a state facility would generate controversy (even some relatives of residents may oppose it) and raise the ire of unions who represent its employees. It's also likely to cost millions of dollars to finance the transition.

Granted, this is not an easy issue. Rosewood's residents include many who are there by court order, often because they were judged incompetent to stand trial. In some instances, community-based programs may not be the correct placement. But advocates believe that's a relatively small fraction of the population.

As for cost, the state would save money in the long run because community-based treatment is far more efficient. The governor recognized that fact when he spoke out in favor of community-based care in 2002. Rosewood's continuing problems are a black mark for the state. Its residents deserve better than to be ignored.