

Disabled center's closure debated

Delegate to back bill to close state-owned institution

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A state legislator announced plans yesterday to introduce a bill to close the Rosewood Center, the state-run institution in Baltimore County for profoundly disabled adults, where state investigators have found repeated examples of patient abuse.

"It's an abomination," said Del. James W. Hubbard, a Prince George's County Democrat. "No one should live under these conditions."

Hubbard's announcement coincided with the release of a report on Rosewood from the Maryland Disability Law Center. The 25-page document alleges years of inadequate treatment, the illegal use of restraint and seclusion rooms and improper bans on family visits at the 300-acre facility.

Author Rachel London, the law center's staff attorney, said at a news conference yesterday in Annapolis that Rosewood routinely defied required "professional standards and legal mandates" designed to ensure the safe and proper care of the 200 residents of the rolling campus in Owings Mills.

She cited the example of a deaf patient named Jason who had been without an interpreter for much of his time at Rosewood and had been restrained for bad behavior with a "safety coat," which is similar to a straitjacket.

"These restraints incapacitate Jason's hands, his only means of communication," London wrote.

The law center's report on alleged civil rights violations at Rosewood also relies on findings made this month by inspectors from the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

In response to their own investigation, state health regulators threatened to pull Rosewood's \$17 million in federal funding if the center did not reform. Officials with the state also imposed an immediate, monthlong ban last week on all new admissions, saying the state needs to use its staff to concentrate on its existing patient load.

In interviews this week, Rosewood officials said that more improvement was necessary, even though some progress has been made to correct deficiencies.

High staff turnover and a mixed population of residents that includes court-ordered patients charged with crimes have exacerbated problems at Rosewood, said Alexis M. Melin, the regional director who oversees Rosewood for the state Developmental Disabilities Administration.

For example, a staffer failed to notice that a patient stole a knife during an outing to a department store. The worker was supposed to be watching the patients at all times, according to state investigators. And the armed patient later stabbed another Rosewood resident with the knife, according to police. The worker has been fired.

Of the 14 patients cited by state investigators as either suffering abuse at the hands of other residents or from self-injury, Melin said four left Rosewood and another six cases have been reviewed by center staffers.

She added that officials have already taken action to change the care of two patients.

"As you bring down the number, we are talking about four remaining consumers," she said, adding that they would receive attention soon.

But the scope of the problems at Rosewood could be more extensive, according to the Jan. 18 state health department report. Of the 77 reports of violence or neglect lodged between October and January and reviewed by state investigators, Rosewood staff members failed to take corrective action in 26 cases.

"It was determined that the facility failed to ensure that individuals are free from abuse, neglect and mistreatment and that the potential for harm existed," state health department investigators concluded.

Still, Melin said officials intend to submit a new plan to address the state's concerns, a move that could stave off the threatened cut to Rosewood's federal funding. They are also hoping that the state will lift its ban on new patients for Rosewood, though Melin said the ban was "positive. We need time to regroup and ensure we have enough time to put new systemic changes into place."

Some advocates believe that if Rosewood were to close, many patients could be placed in community-based programs. But many family members of longtime Rosewood residents say that community-based programs are simply inadequate for their loved ones' substantial needs and round-the-clock care. The real problems at Rosewood, they say, are its court-committed residents with violent criminal histories.

But Maryland Disability Law Center executive director Virginia Knowlton said yesterday that sometimes court-ordered placements at Rosewood were misguided.

"There are people at Rosewood who should have never been sent there," she said. "They are accused of petty crimes."

Added Hubbard: "It shouldn't become a holding place for judges who don't know where to stick people."

The time is ripe, Hubbard said, to close Rosewood. A new formulation for federal funding would require the state to have to pay 25 percent of the cost of shuttering the facility and transferring its residents to community-based programs, he said.

In years past, when the idea of Rosewood was floated but rejected because of the \$5 million cost, the state's burden was 50 percent of the total, according to Hubbard.

Gov. Martin O'Malley has not yet taken a position in the Rosewood debate. But events over the last year, including a sexual assault and stabbings of residents, have brought new attention to the fate of the center.

Advocates for the disabled rallied several former residents of Rosewood to speak out yesterday about why they believe the institution needed to be closed.

"I didn't belong there," said Richard Lowry, a 55-year-old Howard County man who lived in Rosewood from 1966 until 1984. "Now I'm in [a group home]. ... I'm here today because I believe that no one has to live at Rosewood."

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