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Maryland officials say they no longer are under threat of an imminent federal lawsuit over conditions at the Great Oaks center for the mentally retarded after a tour Thursday by U.S. Justice Department officials.

John R. Dunne, assistant U.S. attorney general for civil rights, and members of his staff toured the Silver Spring facility with Gov. William Donald Schaefer and other state officials.

State Health Secretary Nelson J. Sabatini said he believed the meeting at least bought time for the state to negotiate a plan that may include transferring some patients from the 250-bed facility, but is likely to leave Great Oaks open.

"The governor and Dunne had a very good, positive conversation," Sabatini said. "It was not a confrontational thing."

Amy Casner, a spokeswoman for Dunne, said the assistant attorney general "learned a great deal" from the visit, but would not comment on whether he believes conditions at the facility have been improving.

In a January letter to Schaefer, Dunne alleged civil rights violations at the facility, including improper use of physical restraints and drugs and inadequate training programs. The letter threatened legal action if the state did not quickly make improvements that local officials said would have cost an estimated \$ 5 million annually -- a price tag that led Schaefer to consider closing the facility.