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**BODY:**

Federal pressure may force Maryland to close its Great Oaks Center for the mentally retarded or pump millions of additional dollars into the Silver Spring facility, Gov. William Donald Schaefer said yesterday.

After an afternoon tour of Great Oaks, Schaefer said it appears to be one of the better-run institutions for adults with mental disabilities.

But he said that federal demands to increase staffing and upgrade programs may force him to consider closing the 20-year-old center.

"I see a lot of good here," Schaefer said. "I wonder, if we are forced to close, what happens."

The U.S. Department of Justice contends that 550 employees at Great Oaks is an insufficient number to care for the 250 residents, 220 of whom are "profoundly retarded," said Nelson J. Sabatini, secretary of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

The Justice Department, which oversees the civil rights of institutionalized people, is ready to sue unless the state agrees to changes that would cost \$ 5 million a year, the state health department said in a briefing paper that lists the pros and cons of closing Great Oaks.

Schaefer and health department officials said they will have to decide soon whether to comply with the Justice Department's costly demands in the face of a state budget crunch.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department is pushing for action, Sabatini said.

Federal officials have been watching the facility for years and frequently have threatened it with the loss of federal money.

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Schaefer's tour yesterday, administration officials said, is the start of an attempt to resolve the facility's problems once and for all.

"Justice is saying, 'Here are our concerns, what are you going to do to address them, what action are you going to take?' " said Sabatini, who did not rule out a federal lawsuit over conditions at Great Oaks.

Sabatini pointed out that officials of the federal Health Care Financing Administration, which has different concerns than the Justice Department, recently toured the institution but found no problems.

"Another viable option is to say, 'We don't agree with you, and that is why God made judges,' " Sabatini said.

Two years ago, relatives of patients at the Rosewood facility for the retarded in Baltimore teamed with state legislators to block a closure plan. The Schaefer administration instead decreased the number of residents there.

Any attempt to close Great Oaks is likely to touch off a similar fight, Del. Howard P. Rawlings (D-Baltimore) said. Relatives of patients at the Silver Spring facility have rallied before to oppose transfers and staff reductions.

Rawlings said Great Oaks ranks as "one of our best facilities.

"We have invested millions of dollars . . . in Great Oaks. And the clientele there continues to need service," he said. "It makes sense that we try to work out what problems exist, not to summarily close facilities or have to be dealing with lawsuits that will result in the state spending money that it does not have."

**GRAPHIC: PHOTO, GOV. WILLIAM DONALD SCHAEFER.**