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The Justice Department is investigating complaints of abuse and other violations of the civil rights of mentally retarded people at the state-run Great Oaks Center in Silver Spring, state officials said yesterday.

Maryland Secretary of Health and Mental Hygiene Adele Wilzack said the concerns about the center were raised in a letter sent to Gov. Harry Hughes before he left office this month.

"We know that there have been problems in the past at Great Oaks Center. We have directed our attention to those problems and believe we have made significant headway in correcting them," Wilzack said.

The Great Oaks Center takes care of about 400 mentally retarded people from five southern Maryland counties.

Great Oaks has repeatedly come under criticism for alleged neglect of residents, including a case in which a mentally retarded person choked to death.