



39 of 98 DOCUMENTS

Copyright 1991 The Washington Post
The Washington Post

July 3, 1991, Wednesday, Final Edition

SECTION: METRO; PAGE C1

LENGTH: 656 words

HEADLINE: Mental Patients At Md. Center Allegedly Abused;
Improper Use of Restraints, Drugs Cited in Federal Probe

SERIES: Occasional

BYLINE: Howard Schneider, Washington Post Staff Writer

DATELINE: ANNAPOLIS, July 2, 1991

BODY:

Patients at the state-run Great Oaks Center for the mentally retarded have been drugged merely for the "convenience of staff" and have suffered other "flagrant" violations of their rights, according to a federal investigation of the Silver Spring facility.

In an eight-page memorandum sent to Gov. William Donald Schaefer in January, officials from the U.S. Department of Justice alleged that some of Great Oaks's approximately 250 patients have been improperly restrained and drugged, while others frequently injure themselves because of poor supervision and do not receive the physical or psychiatric therapy they need.

Patients "are being subjected to egregious or flagrant conditions that deprive them of their constitutional rights," the department said in the memo, a copy of which was obtained today by The Washington Post.

The memo said that in recent years, drugs were administered to sedate patients "for the convenience of staff," and that self-abusive patients are fitted with "protective devices" such as helmets and arm splints rather than trained to stop trying to hurt themselves.

"Rocking, pacing and aimlessly wandering residents were seen throughout the institution," the memo said. "Instances of self-abuse were not an uncommon sight; observed attempts to intervene appropriately were rare." The memo also said there was an "alarmingly high" rate of resident injuries, nearly 2,000 between April 1989 and March 1990, a quarter of which went officially "unexplained" in staff logs.

The memo by John R. Dunne, assistant attorney general for civil rights, has formed the basis for federal demands that the state spend as much as \$ 5 million annually to improve staffing and programs at Great Oaks or face a possible lawsuit under the provisions of federal law designed to safeguard the civil rights of institutionalized persons.

After a tour of Great Oaks on Monday, Schaefer said the Justice Department's demands were too expensive and are

Mental Patients At Md. Center Allegedly Abused; Improper Use of Restraints, Drugs Cited in Federal Probe The Washington Post July 3, 1991, Wednesday, Final Edition

forcing the state to consider closing the facility instead and transferring the residents elsewhere.

He also said the facility appeared well run, a sentiment echoed yesterday by Nelson J. Sabatini, secretary of the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

Sabatini said the conclusions reached by the Justice Department were the result of site visits made as long ago as 1986, and ending in the spring of 1990. Conditions there have improved markedly in the last year, Sabatini said.

"There is no question that there were some significant problems in Great Oaks, some time ago," said Sabatini, who noted that federal officials from a different agency inspected Great Oaks recently and found no faults in the quality of care. "We have taken care of a lot of it."

In response to federal demands for increased staffing and better programs, Sabatini said the state is developing a plan for further improvements that should be completed this week. If that plan is rejected, Sabatini said, closing Great Oaks or substantially decreasing its population may be the only options.

Federal scrutiny of Great Oaks reflects a broader debate over whether the mentally retarded are better off in large institutions or in smaller community homes and apartment settings. Federal officials have in recent years pressured states to rely less on large institutions, closing them when it's possible and reducing the patient population when it is not.

Mindy Morrell, of the Maryland Disabilities Law Center, said closing Great Oaks would be a positive step, because large facilities are plagued by the types of problems outlined in the Justice Department memo.

Despite Sabatini's claim that conditions are improving, she said, complaints monitored by the law center indicate those problems still exist.

"There is no question there are real problems there," Morrell said. "The question the state will be grappling with is whether it makes sense to pour a lot of money in."