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HEADLINE: The Great Exodus at Md.'s Great Oaks

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BODY:

Up the long, gently circling drive that leads to the Great Oaks Center, van after van has come these last few weeks, sometimes several a day. Slowly they've pulled close to the flat-roofed buildings labeled Woodland Gardens and Oak Terrace, lowering their grated wheelchair lifts like drawbridges over a moat.

Then one by one, the men and women who have lived at Great Oaks for years, or decades, have been brought out. There have been few goodbyes, for few of those leaving can talk. Nearly all are profoundly retarded, and some are blind, deaf or autistic. They ride in specially contoured and padded wheelchairs, chairs with wide trays and semi-recumbent angles that are more forgiving of contorted limbs. The chairs have been loaded, the van doors shut, the drawbridge again raised.

Twelve days ago, this sprawling Maryland state institution housed 51 people. By Monday morning, the number had dwindled to 29. By Wednesday, as the exodus accelerated, an additional 15 residents had been moved out, with five more by yesterday. Russell Daggs, after 25 years, gone. Virginia Massa, after 17 years, gone. Timmy Walsh, who arrived in 1974, gone. His parents drove him away, clutching the miniature squeak toy, a blue-and-cream-colored bear, that he is never without.

This morning, only nine residents remained in a facility that once held nearly 500. All are scheduled to depart by early next week.

With these final farewells -- long and bitterly fought by parents terrified over how their children will survive -- Maryland will close its third institution for the mentally retarded since 1986. Yet Great Oaks, which sits on 150 acres on the border between Montgomery and Prince George's counties, represents more than just another shuttered state facility.

Pushed by significant budget constraints and a lawsuit intended to close Great Oaks because of allegedly deficient care, Maryland officials agreed several months ago to place virtually every resident in neighborhood group homes, no matter how fragile or challenging the person's condition. From now on, they declared, a huge swath of the state from Montgomery County to St. Mary's County would be "institution free."

"People are better served in the community," said Diane K. Ebberts, director of the Developmental Disabilities

Administration. "We thought it was real important to make a statement along those lines."

"This is a fundamental shift," said Steven Ney, legal director of the Maryland Disability Law Center, and one that he hopes presages the end of Maryland's four remaining institutions. Today, they hold only 638 people, compared with more than four times that number 20 years ago.

"We're almost home," Ney said. "Literally, that's almost true."

For many who work in the field of mental retardation, the goal no longer is to radically scale down these facilities. The push is to empty them, to end their social segregation and, according to proponents, allow their residents the privacy, freedom and choices that come with living in a residential neighborhood and being a part of the greater community.

In the last four years, three New England states and the District of Columbia have moved their entire institutional populations into group homes. Others are following suit.

"We underestimate the human condition to think that people aren't aware or affected by their surroundings," said D.C. lawyer Andrew Lipps. He has been working with the Disability Law Center in the Maryland court case, which was brought in 1991 by six families.

But the families who battled both the state and advocacy groups to keep Great Oaks open are not convinced. While supporters of the shutdown talk of residents' right to independence and privacy, the parents talk of the right to safety. They acknowledge that Great Oaks was "not perfect," clearly ambivalent about the injuries their children received. And yet, to them, the walls of Great Oaks still symbolized protection.

One mother's tone hints of betrayal, too. "We thought our kids would be in Great Oaks the rest of our lives. That's what we were told," said Sharon Bertagnolli, of Rockville, whose 25-year-old daughter has moved to a Waldorf group home.

By and large, these are parents who are near or past retirement. Their children are middle age chronologically but mere toddlers mentally. In Rockville, William Massa felt reassured knowing doctors and nurses would be close at hand at Great Oaks, that on its spacious grounds, his daughter could be taken on a walk without encountering traffic or other dangers.

Virginia Massa is a 52-year-old woman who spends her days wearing a helmet. A lifetime ago, she was a high school honors student and accomplished pianist -- until encephalitis destroyed much of her brain. "Now you're going to put her in a group home where you have to fight to get a nurse," her father complained.

Others share his anguish.

"Timmy's 34," explained Jeanne Walsh, of Fort Washington, her son nearby but oblivious to her brutally frank remarks. "He's quadriplegic. He's profoundly retarded and also has a profound hearing loss. He's incontinent. He never will be capable of holding a job or having friends. He requires complete and total care. He's never going to be able to take his place in society."

The rules of the game have changed greatly since Great Oaks opened in 1970. In those early days, toys, tricycles and wagons decorated the grounds, diversions for the many youngsters there. The facility quickly expanded, and before the end of its first decade, a school and nine "cottages" were added.

"I think we all grew up together," said deputy director Joanne Knapp, who became a staff nurse in 1974. She planned to stay two years, not 22, but "fell in love with the people."

Therapy technician Maria Senio also made a career at Great Oaks. "With this type of people," the 21-year veteran

said, "they're very sneaky. Before you know it, they're inside your heart. How can you do it at arm's length?"

Knapp remembers the young, mildly retarded woman named Cindy who had to learn how to ride the Metrobus so she could get to a housekeeping job in downtown Silver Spring. Two staff members shadowed her for a week as she negotiated bus routes and transfers. "We were waiting for them to call and say she never got there, and it never happened," Knapp said with a broad smile. Cindy left Great Oaks several months later. She now has her own apartment.

Over the years, though, Great Oaks suffered its share of troubles: Reports of residents being drugged for some workers' convenience; persistent complaints of abuse and neglect; a rape and pregnancy. One resident allegedly died after swallowing a rubber glove, another after squeezing her head between bedrails.

As recently as 1994, the state threatened to revoke the facility's Medicaid funding because of deficiencies. Later that year, only a month before he left office, Gov. William Donald Schaefer announced the decision to close the institution.

Concerns about care, quality of life and cost -- Maryland paid an average of \$ 128,324 for each Great Oaks resident in 1995 -- help explain the continuing decline of large, state-run institutions nationwide. But the issue also is colored by shadings of gray. A study to be published this summer in the American Journal of Mental Retardation, for example, concluded that the odds of a person dying in a residential setting are 72 percent higher than in an institution.

"There is a substantial amount of evidence that the community doesn't have adequate medical support," said the study's co-author, physician Theodore Kastner, who directs the Center for Human Development at Morristown Memorial Hospital in New Jersey and served as a state consultant on Great Oaks last year. "I don't believe we can operate the system without some institutional capacity."

But the debate is over for Great Oaks. Its cottages sit locked and empty. At the school, equipment is being inventoried on the floor of its giant atrium. Wheelchairs are lined up like sentries along one wall, a rampart of pillows stacked against another. In a silent classroom, a poster reads: "Tolerance is seeing with your heart instead of your eyes."

The residents still here in these final weeks generally have been the hardest to place -- or their parents the most strident about having them remain. They demanded to see the group home where a son or daughter might go. Sometimes that wasn't possible; the house hadn't even been purchased yet by the nonprofit agency that would run it.

"I want him to stay here," one mother pleaded with Suzie Burke Harrison, the state's liaison to the families. Harrison's soft reply: "There is no here."

For Timmy Walsh, the new "here" is a yellow and beige rambler in Waldorf with a huge back yard. For Virginia Massa, it is a house in Laurel, a rose-colored bedroom filled with stuffed animals to keep her company at night.

For 48-year-old Russell Daggs, home suddenly is on a peaceful street in Calvert County, where he can sit porch-side to watch the birds. His mother and younger sister Jan, who live in Prince George's, went on a shopping spree to help get the house ready for his arrival last week.

They purchased towels and linens and dishes and more. For his bedroom, they bought a dresser and headboard with a "masculine, contemporary oak look," as Jan described it, glancing at a photograph that showed her brother, a handsome man with green eyes and the distinctive Daggs family jawline.

"For us, this is good," she said. She is trying to let go of her anger over the "arrogance" with which she says state officials treated Great Oaks families. She wants to delight in the new day program Russell started, the trip he took to the park, the fact that for the first time in what seems like forever, her brother is sleeping in a bed without protective rails.

"If all this comes to pass," she said quietly, "it will be positive. It will be better for him to be in the community."

GRAPHIC: Photo, frank johnston; Map, larry fogel, Virginia Massa, right, who lived at Great Oaks Center for 17 years, looks around her new group home in Laurel with her friend Barbara Reese. Maryland officials are closing Great Oaks and moving all residents into the community. Above right, William Massa kisses his daughter, who was an honors student before encephalitis destroyed much of her brain. Virginia Massa, 52, waits in her wheelchair to be signed out of Great Oaks, which opened in 1970. Around her, from left, are staff members Bernice McQueen, Barbara Larimore, Joanne Knapp and Sonia D'Angles.

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