



21 of 98 DOCUMENTS

Copyright 1994 The Washington Post
The Washington Post

December 9, 1994, Friday, Final Edition

SECTION: METRO; PAGE B5

LENGTH: 645 words

HEADLINE: Schaefer Moves to Close Facility for Retarded Adults

SERIES: Occasional

BYLINE: Amy Goldstein, Washington Post Staff Writer

DATELINE: ANNAPOLIS, Dec. 8

BODY:

Gov. William Donald Schaefer announced plans today to close the Great Oaks Center, a Silver Spring institution that has been plagued by lawsuits and federal complaints of dangerous conditions for its profoundly retarded residents.

Schaefer said he wants to find group homes within two years for most of the 163 adults who live there and transfer a few dozen others to similar institutions elsewhere in the state.

The plan will accelerate efforts by Maryland health officials to move severely disabled people from large, state-run institutions to more home-like community settings, a trend taking place across the country.

The governor's plan also responds to a legacy of injuries and unnecessary deaths among Great Oaks residents, who come primarily from Montgomery and Prince George's counties and Southern Maryland.

Newer than most similar institutions, Great Oaks has had a particularly troubled history since it opened in 1970 to relieve crowding at Maryland's four other institutions for the mentally retarded.

A 1991 federal investigation found that some residents had been drugged for the workers' convenience and that others who are self-abusive had been outfitted with helmets and splints, rather than taught not to hurt themselves.

During a one-year period, nearly 2,000 injuries were logged, one-fourth of them listed as unexplained, according to the U.S. investigators, who called that incidence "alarming high."

Great Oaks still faces a federal class-action suit, lodged in 1991 by Maryland's main advocacy group for the disabled. The suit alleges that one resident died after swallowing a rubber glove, another after squeezing her head between a bed's rails.

Schaefer's decision is being praised by the advocacy group, the Maryland Disability Law Center, which has been urging the state to close Great Oaks.

"I'm delighted," said Steven Ney, the law center's legal director. "You wouldn't want anyone in your family to go there. It is not a benign institution."

But it is not certain whether the governor's plan will outlast his term of office, which expires next month.

His decision already is attracting opposition from a state-appointed legal counsel for Great Oaks' residents and at least one Maryland lawmaker who plans to try to block the closing during the legislative session that begins Jan. 11.

Thomas B. Stone, a Montgomery lawyer who is the residents' counsel, said that community homes are more humane for many disabled people, but that institutions should stay open for the few residents so severely retarded that they could not live well in a less-restrictive place.

The plan's main architect disagrees. Nelson J. Sabatini, outgoing secretary of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, said that 50 residents will be moved into group homes in each of the next two years.

At that point, about 60 of the most profoundly retarded residents will remain at Great Oaks, which now is licensed for nearly 300. He said they should be moved into the community or to other institutions.

"At that point, it makes no sense to operate a large facility for such a small number of patients," the governor said at a news conference to announce his decision.

The state will need to spend \$ 5 million over the next two years to create community homes for Great Oaks residents, according to Sabatini. But he said the state would save money once entire buildings at the institution are emptied and closed.

The closing of the institution also offers Maryland the lucrative possibility of selling the Great Oaks grounds, a 150-acre tract straddling the Montgomery and Prince George's county line near the Beltway.

The state's five institutions for mentally retarded residents house about 800 residents, compared with nearly 1,800 a decade ago. During that period, the population at Great Oaks has declined by two-thirds.

LOAD-DATE: December 9, 1994