

Alexander center to close

State: News of Medicaid loss reinforces decision

By Cathy Frye, Arkansas Democrat - Gazette

May 19, 2010

LITTLE ROCK — The state plans to close the Alexander Human Development Center, Gov. Mike Beebe announced Tuesday, just one day after the facility received notification that it will soon lose its Medicaid funding.

The impending loss of Medicaid stems from the center's continuing inability to meet federal requirements regarding client protection and staff treatment of clients, according to a letter from the state Office of Long Term Care.

The catalyst cited in the letter's accompanying documentation was the handling of a resident's allegations that a staff member sexually abused him.

However, the Medicaid loss isn't the reason for shuttering the facility, said Julie Munsell, spokesman for the state Department of Human Services.

Human Services Department officials had already made the decision to close the Alexander center on the basis of suggestions from consultants hired to temporarily operate and survey the center, Munsell said.

At a scheduled meeting with the governor Monday, the Human Services Department proposed closing down Alexander and investing the money saved into the five remaining human-development centers.

"That's just where we were when this other thing occurred," Munsell said, referring to the Medicaid notification, which arrived by certified mail about 5 p.m.

"There's some irony in the timing," she noted. "But that reinforced our decision and confirmed that we're heading in the right direction."

None of the other centers is facing the loss of Medicaid funding, Munsell said.

At this time, 109 men live at Alexander. Ninety-seven percent suffer from severe mental disabilities. Of those, 60 percent also have been diagnosed with some form of mental illness. Nearly all rely on Medicaid to cover their needs.

Munsell predicts the center will close sometime in late June or early July.

Dana McClain, a senior attorney with the Little Rock based Disability Rights Center advocacy group, is skeptical of the state's explanation for shutting down the facility.

When she first heard about the decision, McClain said, she felt a surge of optimism, thinking the state was rethinking its position on the human development centers.

“We want to see Arkansas do what’s good for the individual because it’s the right thing to do,” she said.

But news of the Medicaid cut - and the reasons for it - squashed those hopes. “If this is where the problem is, that’s got to be an issue for all the other human-development centers,” she said.

“I think it shows that Arkansas really does need to take a look at how we’re serving individuals with mental disabilities in our state. At some point, Medicaid funding is going to become an issue at all those centers.”

In the coming weeks, Munsell said, the consultants will work with staff members to find new homes for Alexander’s residents. The agency can tap into state funds to temporarily cover anyone who remains at the center when it loses its Medicaid funding.

McClain said she has concerns about this process. She wonders where residents will be placed in such a limited amount of time.

“Moving them to another center doesn’t address the issue of getting them into community,” she said.

Alejandro Miyar, a spokesman for the U.S. Justice Department - which recently filed a lawsuit against the state’s six human-development centers - echoed these sentiments. “It is our hope that those served at Alexander will now be placed in the most integrated setting appropriate to their individuals needs, as mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act,” he said.

“Arkansas can and should develop community alternatives to these institutions.” The Alexander Human Development Center opened in 1968 at what once was a sanitarium for tuberculosis patients. The facility’s aged layout reflects its former role, which has long bothered advocates for the developmentally disabled.

It’s certainly not the therapeutic setting consultants envisioned, Munsell said.

But the cost of the significant changes to the physical plant and the addition of 70 new staff members that the consulting team recommended would prove exorbitant, Munsell said, adding that no costs had been estimated.

“You don’t need a dollar amount to see the bottom line,” she added.

It costs \$10.5 million to run the center as is.

After much discussion over the past few days, everyone agreed it would be better to invest that kind of money in the other centers, Munsell said, adding that there are no plans to close any of the other facilities.

Arkansas' institutional facilities have been the subject of harsh criticism for several years. State and federal investigators cited the Conway center several times in 2001 and 2002 for failing to protect residents from abuse and neglect. The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette then raised questions in a series of articles in June 2002 about medical care, the use of restraints, the administration of drugs, and the lack of death reviews at the center.

In response to the articles, legislators held hearings and asked the center to make numerous improvements, including developing policies to hire an outside medical director to supervise care at all six human-development centers.

The U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division began inspecting the Conway Human Development Center in 2003.

Thus followed legal proceedings, which recently were expanded to include the other five centers.

In its most recent lawsuit, the Justice Department alleged that hundreds of developmentally disabled people are illegally separated from the rest of society because Arkansas doesn't offer alternatives that would allow them to live in community settings.

Munsell says the state agrees in large part with the Justice Department that there need to be adequate resources for developmentally disabled people who want to live in noninstitutional settings.

"Our argument has been - and will continue to be - is that you still need [centers] as options. We will always have a contingency of the population who will need that level of care ... or who thrive in it," Munsell said.

"The families ought to have a choice and more of a voice."

Information for this article was contributed by Amy Upshaw of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.