

FLOOR DEBATE

CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: Question came on a Rep. Scaccia amendment (#231) requiring study and approval of the General Court regarding the closure of any state residences.

Rep. Pedone of Worcester said, I want to start off with congratulating the chairman of Ways and Means. This is a very difficult budget year. The chairman, the speaker, the members have done everything we can to put together a constitutionally-obligated balanced budget that protects core services. This is an amendment for Department of Developmental Disabilities, the former DMR. In this consolidated amendment, there is an amendment that myself and others in the House have asked for consideration and support. The administration is on a mission, something that I support, that most members support, and that is to provide the best quality and least-restrictive way of taking care of the most vulnerable people in this Commonwealth. This amendment asks the administration to step back and do a feasibility study on closing state schools and institutions for people with developmental disabilities. There are four state schools. And Massachusetts has a great history of doing what we can that people with disabilities have meaningful lives and are in quality homes. There are people in communities who can't live by themselves. And that's why we set up these schools to take care of these young adults and others, to make sure the treatment of these kids is something that the parents and the guardians can be proud of. This administration has moved quickly to reduce the in-treatment of these children. What we're asking for the administration, before they close any of these, is to do a feasibility study, whether or not it's in the best interest of this Commonwealth to close these schools. There is a potential if we don't adopt this amendment, it's going to cost us more money, because we have to keep these schools open. This administration has not done an adequate job of explaining to the House how they're going to do this. We've had amendments like this in the past to deal with Worcester and Westborough state hospitals being closed without a plan. It's a responsible thing to do in light of our budget crisis, for the protection and care of these kids, it's a responsible thing to do as legislators. I ask that this amendment be adopted.

Rep. Sannicandro of Ashland said, I'm rising and objecting to the amendment. There are some good points but I feel compelled to tell my story and how I arrived at this situation. Some of you have met my son with Down syndrome, who has always lived in a community. There's not many people younger than my age that have never been institutionalized. This is an emotional issue for me. I tell you the day I went through there, I almost vomited. The whole concept to me was just so difficult. So difficult to see that people have to live in this type of situation. My point is we have a generation in the community with disabilities like people who live in Fernald. And I think it's important to treat them like adults and give their families the opportunity. I know the gentleman from Worcester understands this issue fully. I agree with part of what he's saying. The department of developmental services should report back to us. We're going to keep two institutions open. My concern is, as a dad, once we keep these institutions open, there's always the possibility of sending future generations. That's my biggest fear.

Rep. T. Stanley said, I thank the gentleman for yielding. I was with the previous speaker for a tour. After this tour, we went back to my house, had some coffee and talked about the facility. Not having a person in my family with developmental disabilities, it's very difficult to talk about this emotionally. But we can clearly see where the lines have been divided. The amendment does not try to put forward whether we should continue with institutionalization. It just says shows us the cost-benefit analysis and then let's move forward.

Rep. Pedone said, The gentleman from Framingham and I have great respect for each other. Ninety-five percent of the amendment, we agree on. My uncle is in the position where he can be living in that situation. Many but not all of the people in these facilities have been in the community and the community has failed them. Until we do a better job funding community-based settings, it's irresponsible to say we're closing them. This administration doesn't have a plan. I

hope this amendment is adopted.

Rep. Smola said, Let me begin by saying to the gentleman from Framingham, he is a wonderful advocate for these line items. The governor's plan, the Community First plan, it says out of the six state hospitals we have, two of them will stay open. We're not closing down all state institutions. We're leaving two of them open. If you have a loved one, you have the option of going to Wrentham. If you're driving from Pittsfield, you have far to go. Over the course of two hearings, we questioned the governor's staff of this, the secretary of health and human services, the director of developmental disabilities, and I think it's very clear we didn't have the answers. If we conclude that we want to shut down all of the state institutions, that's absolutely fine.

Rep. Peterson asked if he would yield. He did.

Rep. Peterson said, These are not easy amendments. But I would hope that this amendment would pass. We're asking to study the financial implications. We're dealing with the budget. We're dealing with an administration that is looking in every direction for areas to cut. But these are some unique situations and individuals. I urge the members to think long and hard and support this amendment.

Rep. Gobi of Spencer said, I also hope this amendment will pass. Just to be very brief, I represent the Templeton Developmental Center when I read about it in the paper. That's how my local officials found out about it. I don't have a lot of faith in the administration. If that's how they do things at the start, I don't even want to know what the end is going to be like. We have an opportunity to see how and if these closings should take place.

Rep. Sullivan of Fall River said, I rise in support of this amendment and I want explain why. I worked with the Department of Mental Health. I worked with most populations. There is a percentage of people who require the structure. I am a proponent of putting people in the community. But I'm also a realist. I think that the cost-benefit analysis is warranted. I think we need to be very, very careful as we proceed on this and we do it for the right reasons.

Rep. Polito of Shrewsbury, I rise in support of this amendment and I appreciate the prior members who have spoken on this amendment. I rise in support because I think it's very important that we do take this step back. I first learned about the governor's plan when I read it in the newspapers around the holidays in December. We are people who obviously care about the constituents and the people we represent. We need to be part of this decision-making process. The governor has very good and decent people he's working with who provide more choices for people. But I also know individuals in my hometown who have significant impairments that would be unable to thrive in a community settings. So we need a full range of choices for people. I think we need to step back and take a look at all six. I know some of the facilities offer help to some sexually dangerous people. We also need to look at the cost. The costs are across the board. I hear from people that placing people in home settings would cost more. I think being able to step back and work with the administration and figure out what the best places are.

Rep. Sannicandro said, I rise again in opposition to this amendment. At a Ways and Means hearing, there was a man named Charlie. His recommendation is these institutions must close. This movement to close these institutions has been going on for 20 years. In the country of Canada there are no institutions like this. In New England, there are six, and five are in Massachusetts.

The amendment was adopted.